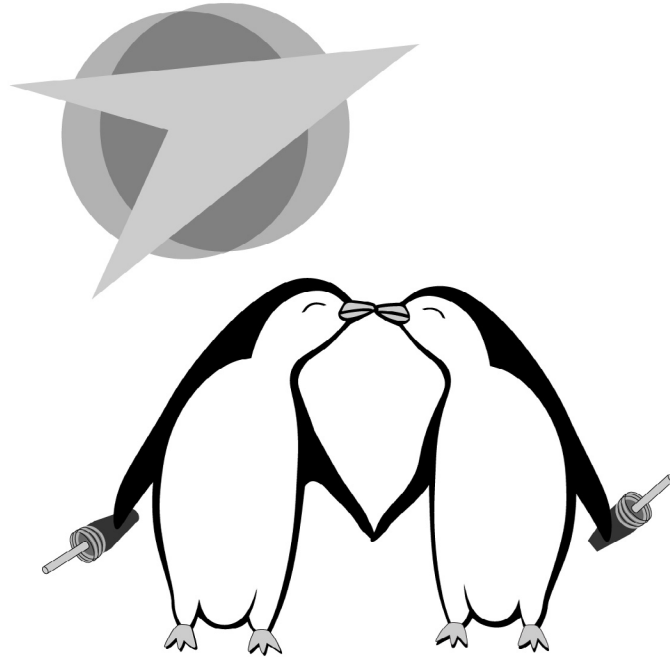


e•reader





Blake's Penguins

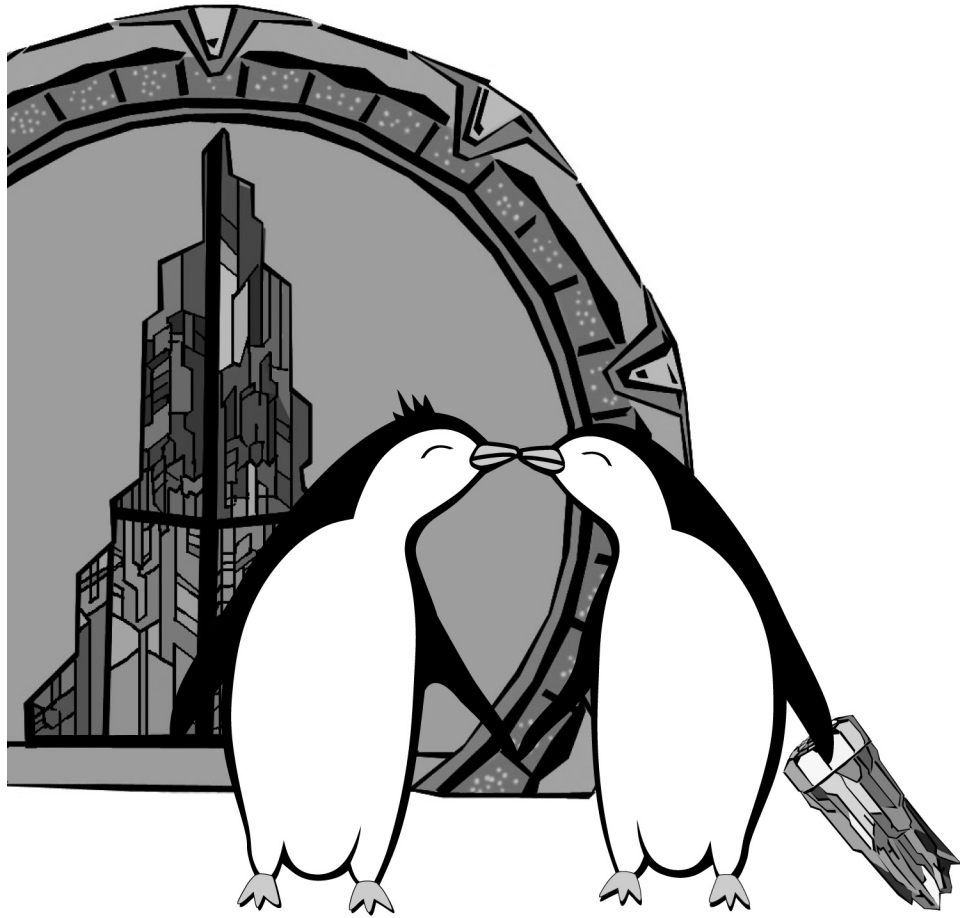
Escapade 25th Anniversary Fanzine *a multi-media anthology*

copyright © March 2015 by Escapade. Copyright not intended to infringe on any legally existing copyrights or trademarks held by any person or corporation. This publication is printed under 17 U.S. Code section 107 citing Fair Use. These works are transformative, adding new meaning and messages to the original; they are limited, not copying the entirety of the original [work(s)]; and they do not substitute for the original work(s).

Table of Contents

<i>Drifting</i> by Astolat [<i>Person of Interest</i> x <i>Pacific Rim</i>]	1
<i>The Plan</i> by Natasha Solten [<i>Wiseguy</i>].....	18
<i>Pseudacris Crucifer</i> by Franzeska [<i>Veritas</i>]	22
<i>One Night in LA</i> by Raine Wynd [<i>Highlander</i>]	26
<i>As the Years Multiply</i> by PFL [<i>The Professionals</i>]	31
<i>Comet</i> by Devo [<i>Highlander</i>]	41
<i>An Offer in the Form</i> by Charlotte C. Hill [<i>Almost Human</i>]	44
<i>The 12 (and more) years of Escapade</i> by Anonymous	72
<i>Under The Stairs</i> by Dovya Blacque [<i>Sentinel</i>].....	75
<i>Brazen it Out</i> by Megan Kent [<i>MCU</i>]	84
<i>Intervention</i> by Glacis [<i>Multi</i>]	94
<i>Moving Up</i> by KatBear [<i>Star Trek</i>].....	125
<i>Breaking and Making Up</i> by KatBear [<i>The Phantom Menace</i>].....	130
<i>Small Packages</i> by Rhi [<i>Multi</i>].....	136
<i>Will You Let Your Cities Crumble</i> by Mead [<i>The Professionals</i>]	143
<i>The Real Thing</i> by Sandy Herrold [<i>Imagine You & Me</i>].....	167
<i>Silver</i> by Jane Mailander [<i>Sherlock</i>].....	175
About the Contributors.....	179

This fanzine contains over 111,000 words.



Atlantean Penguins

Foreword

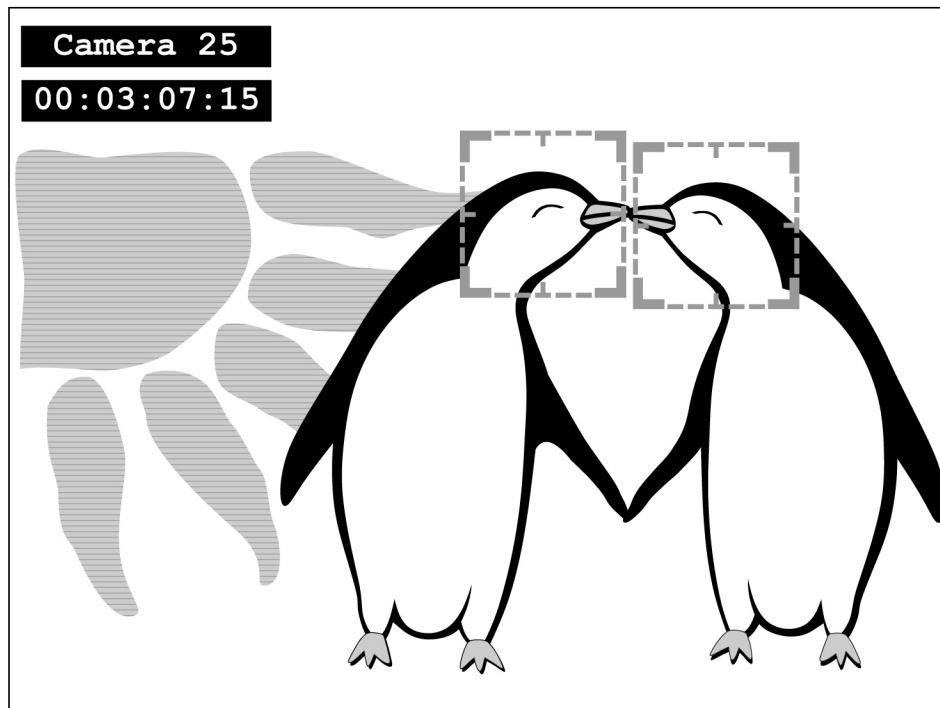
It has been a long, *long* time since we considered publishing a fanzine, but celebrating 25 years of Escapade necessitated one. All of the authors, you'll meet on the pages. Gattagrighia, Killa, and Stranger shared their editing expertise on certain stories, under heroic deadlines. Most authors put their betas to work before they even submitted their stories.

Dail kept emails from falling through the cracks, read *Highlander* fic, helped maintain quality control on task lists, and remained a staunch barrier against which Charlotte could flail when time grew short.

And Naked Bee... poor, sweet Naked Bee said, "So when am I going to get the parts of the zine to lay out?" (We are not fools. No one asked, "Who said you *could* lay out the zine?" Charlotte just said, "Uh... yeah. When they get done?") Little did Naked Bee know how late some things get done. In addition to creating all of the mascot-themed art to represent the fandoms, she did a beautiful job executing the layout of the zine.

This, as all things Escapade, is a product of many hands and many hearts.

Charlotte & Megan



Drifting

by Astolat

Editor's Notes

Can you envision a story wherein characters and the universe of *Person of Interest* seamlessly flow into the universe of *Pacific Rim*? We could not. Then Astolat sent us the following, and now it's as if this was the natural result of PoI, and anything else would just be silly.

Drifting

by Astolat

The shoes made an irregular tapping noise crossing the bare concrete from the shelter door, getting louder until they finally paused in front of him: fine black leather, oxfords with a subtle pattern of perforations mimicking the curve of a toe cap, consciously stylish and not heavily worn. John was pretty sure, with the part of his brain that still automatically catalogued these kinds of things, that they were new enough they had to have been bought in the last year — since the first attack. Probably since the second one.

When they stayed right by his head, John rolled onto his side and squinted up at the owner without warmth. Large watery blue eyes looked down at him through wire-rim glasses, a compact body in a three-piece suit that matched the shoes: expensive, tailored, elaborate in green and grey. The man was flanked by two obvious bodyguards in more ordinary plain black suits, the three of them standing out like neon lights among the crowded dark of the shelter: everyone else on their cots and bedrolls was eyeing them, some hungrily, others warily, backing away from the potential for some kind of fight.

“If I owe you money, I’m fresh out,” John said, and didn’t bother to make it anything other than a sneer. He also didn’t bother to put a hand over his mouth while he belched up some of the whiskey fumes. He’d managed to scrounge a fifth two days ago out of the corner of a mostly crushed liquor store in the condemned zone. Most people didn’t want to risk going into the worse-damaged buildings. He reached under his pillow to dig out what was left of the bottle.

“You don’t owe me anything, Mr. Reese,” the man said, and John stiffened. “But I was hoping you would be willing to listen to a proposition.”

“Like what?” John said, bitterly. He brought out the bottle and took a swig. He’d had a few offers since quitting. From the kinds of people who wanted the services of an ex-assassin these days, the kinds of people who would exploit even the

worst of human misery and devastation. If this asshole with his five hundred dollar shoes tried to make him another, John was half tempted to put him and his two bodyguards down hard, invite everyone else to pick them clean, and throw them out naked.

“I believe we can help each other,” the man said. “You see, Mr. Reese, I have a purpose. And you need one.”

“Getting you another pair of those shoes?” John said.

The man glanced down at his own feet briefly; a bite entered his voice. “I don’t feel the need to put my tailor and shoemaker out of business in order to demonstrate my recognition of the danger the world is presently facing, Mr. Reese, nor have I considered it appropriate to drink myself to death and save the kaiju the trouble. If that’s really the best thing you can imagine doing, I’ll leave you to it; if on the other hand you’d be interested in contributing more productively to the defense effort, I can offer you a chance to do so.”

~ ~ ~

John went with him. It wasn’t the money Finch dangled for his time, although after a couple months in a refugee shelter, John wouldn’t have minded a night in a hotel. It wasn’t the promise of something to do, something that would matter in the face of monsters. That was just a fairy tale. John was still about ninety percent sure that Finch was leading up to some kind of profiteering scam, or maybe something personal — a guy who was still spending money on shoes at the end of the world would probably spend it having somebody killed, too. “I don’t feel the need to put my hitman out of business, either,” he imagined Finch saying, pursed and prissy, and snorted to himself.

Finch glanced over from the other seat but said nothing. Inside the closed car, he had to be getting a good strong whiff of John’s two solid months of stink by now, but he hadn’t so much as wrinkled

his nose. He had a stillness, something hard about him, not brittle but steel. Maybe that was why John had gone along even this far. He thought Finch could maybe tell a *good* fairy tale. The kind that John could believe in for five minutes, and that would be five minutes of peace more than he'd had since he'd stood in front of a television in Morocco and watched the third kaiju come boiling out of the Pacific surf five miles from his parents' house. A helicopter camera had stayed in tight and close as the crushing feet smashed his high school and marched onward to Tacoma and Seattle, thrashing tail leaving nothing but flattened houses in its wake, cars crushed, corpses in the street.

He had just killed somebody that morning: some kind of arms dealer, Mark had said. There had been a photograph in the man's wallet of a dark-eyed smiling woman with four young kids around her. John watched the kaiju go casually and murderously blundering through his own life, staring at his reflection in the television screen as the kaiju's body filled the camera, dark hide blotting everything out. He'd quit that night and caught one plane after another to Spokane, as close as anyone would take him, and from there he'd stolen a motorcycle.

The kaiju had been brought down outside Portland by the time he got to his neighborhood, but it didn't feel anything like victory when John walked through the blasted streets. He dug the corpses of his sister and her children out of their half-crushed basement. He'd never met the younger one, the little girl, and he didn't recognize the boy, the baby he'd held for half an hour that last Thanksgiving after 9/11, just before he'd told the recruiter yes and gone into Delta. The kids were both huddled against her body, faces coated with ash, clinging. He never found his parents.

He hadn't talked to any of them in ten years, but he'd carried them in his heart into what he'd thought were going to be the worst dangers in the world. He'd gone to protect them. Even after the first kaiju, even after the second, he'd let Mark talk him into staying. *The world's going to get darker before it gets light, John. We need you more than ever now.* So he'd been in Morocco instead of Seattle when the third one came. They'd died, and he was alive. It felt like retribution.

A few tears were leaking down his face along the side of his nose, itchy. He stared out of the window at the wreckage outside. Finch's car was fighting its way over the half-patched roads in the refugee zone around Tacoma.

They headed east on the highway for almost an hour, rolling past farmland and through the mountains until the car took an exit into a cupped

valley. A chain-link fence enclosed a big industrial property: a private airstrip and an airplane hangar, some kind of processing plant, some trucks and stacked shipping containers. John watched the hangar grow bigger as they drove across the lot. "So what are you building here?"

"We call it the Jaeger Project," Finch said. The car pulled up to the hangar and he climbed out.

John followed him inside. The hangar was hollow and empty, except for a large round enclosed room against the far wall with big glass windows: he could see a few people working inside it. "The kaiju are obviously not invulnerable to conventional weaponry," Finch said, as they walked towards it across the metal floor, their footsteps ringing. "The problem is their sheer size and density: the vital organs are extremely well protected, and as a result, killing them becomes a long battle of attrition. Am I boring you?" he added, waspishly: John wasn't paying him a lot of attention.

"I've had free time lately," John said. Only a handful of people and equipment around, and though the buildings outside were old, solid, the hangar itself was too clean, too undamaged. It was made of light metal: there were gears along the edges of the roof that made him think it was retractable. It had the air of something new and flimsy, thrown up in a hurry. He didn't see any signs of serious construction. "Assume I know as much as a newspaper article."

"I hope not," Finch said. "They're nearly all badly misinformed. At heart, this is a logistics problem. We have the firepower. We need to concentrate it, deliver it rapidly and flexibly, and ideally before rather than after the kaiju make landfall." They'd reached the room: the guard on the door opened it for them. Inside there were computer screens everywhere, diagrams and schematics, for something that looked like a suit of armor. Finch gestured to one of the diagrams, on a large screen in the middle of the room. "This is the solution: a jaeger."

"Very Don Quixote," John said, raising an eyebrow. "Where's the horse and the jousting pole?"

"Perhaps the scale isn't entirely clear," Finch said, and touched a button: the diagram shrank and slid over, and the outline of the Manila kaiju appeared next to it. The jaeger was roughly the same height.

John stared at it. Finch was going on, apparently serious. "A single, self-contained fighting unit, which can be deployed rapidly through a six-helicopter airlift, operates underwater, with total firepower equivalent to an aircraft carrier. We've done comprehensive studies to — "

“That’s enough,” John said flatly. Finch paused and blinked those watery eyes at him. “You want to build a giant robot the size of a football field and beat a kaiju to death with its fists. That’s not a purpose. It’s a *joke*.” He looked around the room: the people at the computers were peeking around at them sidelong — mostly young, twenty-something kids, men and women fresh out of college. John had no idea how Finch had sold them on buying into this — just money, maybe. “How much funding did you weasel out of the government for this?”

“None,” Finch said.

“Really,” John said, and tapped a knuckle on the screen. “How much is one of these bad boys going to run you?”

“Nine billion dollars,” Finch said. “Maintenance will add a further billion dollars over the jaeger’s average lifespan.”

John’s mouth twitched, a parody of a smile. He felt dangerous, his hands wanting to clench. Finch was facing him with an impenetrable face, mouth a thin line. “So is that the idea?” John said softly. “You want someone to put on a uniform and go to D.C. with you, explain why the government should write you a nice fat check — “

“You would hardly be the ideal candidate for a lobbyist, and I’m funding the development of the prototype personally,” Finch snapped back. “Tell me something, Mr. Reese. You were halfway around the world killing people for the CIA when the kaiju landed here. Did you enjoy watching safely from afar while it slaughtered two hundred thousand people? Including your family?”

John had him slammed up against the column, arm jammed up under Finch’s chin, his other hand immobilizing Finch’s wrist painfully against the desk. Finch’s gaze didn’t waver or flinch from his. “Do you think it was any easier being in the Bay Area, for the first one?” Finch said, though his voice was straining against the choke-hold.

John stared at him, his own chest rising in deep rapid pants. He let Finch go and backed up. Finch reached up with a slightly shaky hand to rub his throat and settle his tie. He made a gesture: the security guard who’d started coming towards them — he hadn’t gotten into range for a kick yet — stepped warily back to the door. Finch cleared his throat. “As you yourself seem to have grasped, Mr. Reese,” he said, already pulling himself back in, his feathers smoothed, “money doesn’t really matter very much anymore. However, I happen to have a great deal of it, and I’m not shy about spending it.”

John was slowly coming down off the adrenaline rush. He took a deep gulping breath. “I guess not,” he said, letting it out. “Not if you’re blowing it on this — fantasy.” He had a sour, bitter knot in his belly. He’d wanted a fairy tale, he’d gotten one. But it turned out he couldn’t stomach it after all. “You could put together a Death Star instead. Even if you built this thing, even if it had enough muscle to hurt a kaiju, how do you think it’s going to work? Give an order in the core, five minutes later the arm crew take a swing? We’ve seen kaiju swat jet fighters out of the sky. One of them will put your jaeger on the ground and rip its arms off in ten minutes.” He shut his eyes for a moment, shook his head hard. “We’re through here. Have that car take me back to the shelter.” He turned to go.

“I suppose it’s something that you’ve managed to zero in on the primary design problem,” Finch said behind his back. “Reaction time was indeed our main difficulty. Please take us down, Dr. Sung,” he added, to one of the people at the desks. She punched some buttons and the whole round room shuddered slightly, then started to sink down through the floor, like one huge elevator.

“I said I was leaving,” John said, turning back. He took a warning step towards Finch.

“As it happens, the issue you describe is exactly the one that the jaegers are meant to solve,” Finch said, ignoring him. “The humanoid design isn’t a cosmetic affectation: I assure you I would build a mech shaped like the Death Star or for that matter a bunny rabbit if analysis had indicated one of those would be more effective. But the closer the mech parallels the human body, the more intuitive the user interface becomes, and the faster reaction time gets.”

John stepped in closer, right up against Finch, who only leaned back slightly and stared up at him. “I’m going to make this simple,” he said. “You’re going to take me — “ He stopped. Through the windows, behind Finch’s head, a monumental statue was coming into view. The jaegar was right outside.

John stepped almost involuntarily past Finch and toward the windows as they kept gliding down. The jaeger looked like something out of the dreams of Ozymandias: a smooth polished metal helmet, its blank featureless face illuminated with small work lights and framed with scaffolding; shoulders the width of an aircraft carrier, gleaming steel. There were construction workers clambering all over it, anonymous and faceless in helmets and overalls and thick gloves, wielding drills and blowtorches, long cables snaking away like climbing vines.

“You actually built this thing,” John said. It was an effort to speak. He couldn’t take his eyes off it. They were past the shoulders now, the trunk sliding by. The jaeger stood inside a cavernous shaft, ten times the height of the hangar up on the surface — no, more than ten times. He couldn’t see the bottom yet. It had jagged stair-step walls spiraling around and down — a former quarry maybe, or some other kind of mine. They’d just slapped the hangar on top as a cap.

“Yes,” Finch said. “And I assure you, it is fast enough to take down a kaiju.”

John licked his lips: his mouth felt paper-dry. “You’ve tested it.”

“Yes,” Finch said.

“How does it — ?”

“There’s no crew, Mr. Reese,” Finch said. “The jaeger’s control systems interface directly with the human brain. When the pilot moves, the jaeger moves. No manual input, no delays.”

John turned to stare at him: that made it sound like more of a fantasy, not less. “And that *works*?”

“Yes,” Finch said. “The problem is, it kills the pilot.”

The chamber settled slowly onto the ground with a dull clang. John turned back and looked up out of the windows, at the head of the jaeger far away in the distance crowned with lights, at the huge hands hanging to either side, bigger than tanks. Enough power to stop a kaiju, if you were willing to die for it? John knew he’d take it, unhesitating.

But Finch said, “This isn’t the build up to asking you to go on a suicide mission, if you’re wondering. If that’s all it took, I wouldn’t need to go recruiting a drunk out of a refugee camp. This way, please.”

He turned and led the way out through a set of back doors that slid open onto an antiseptic white hallway. John followed him immediately. He couldn’t guess what Finch did want from him, but he didn’t care anymore. He’d chase Finch all the rest of the way down his rabbit hole.

The hallway ended in a huge laboratory, two large exam-room chairs in the middle of the room, thickly padded, with a snaky nest of cables suspended over the headrests. There was a wall of glass cages full of mice; scientists in white coats were moving among them.

“In order to tap into unconscious motor control, the jaeger control interface requires the mind to be in a state we call drift. We expected any number of problems to begin with — lost signal,

miscommunication — the jaeger raising a foot instead of a hand, so forth. When those didn’t materialize, we became overconfident. We didn’t realize that there was a limit on the amount of signal that the brain could process until we ran a full-scale test,” Finch said. His voice sounded even more clipped than before. “But once the neural load exceeds the capacity of the brain, as it does with a jaeger in full combat mode, seizures begin within five minutes and rapidly increase in severity. Convulsions start within ten minutes, and death follows by the fifteen minute mark.”

“Not enough time to take out a kaiju,” John said.

“No,” Finch said.

“Can pilots trade off?”

Finch raised an eyebrow. “What was it you said a kaiju would do? Rip off the jaeger’s arms in five minutes? In any case, it wouldn’t work. The pilots couldn’t swap back in. The damage caused by even one minute of excess neural load is permanent. But you are approaching the solution,” he added. “Two pilots can share the neural load.”

Tandem drift, as Finch described it, sounded even more of a fairy tale than the jaegers, except this time it was one of the bad old Brothers Grimm versions. Someone else inside your mind, not just reading your thoughts but *sharing* them, having them right along with you, their thoughts flowing through your own head. “Sounds — creepy,” John said.

Finch grimaced. “I don’t disagree. It’s also difficult to arrange. From what we’ve found, less than a tenth of a percent of the population is capable of drift at all, and among those, very few are compatible with one another. Finding a drift-capable pair is not a trivial problem.”

John said, “And that’s what you need me for.”

“Yes,” Finch said. “I’ve obtained substantial numbers of brain activity scans. Your former employers had you undergo one in 2008.” John looked away. He remembered the scan. He’d been held by a North Korean cell for nearly two weeks, drugged and interrogated nonstop before Kara had managed to break him out. The CIA had put him through every test they had: they’d worried he was lying when he told them he hadn’t broken. Finch went on. “You were one of twenty-three candidates we turned up, and the only one who might be compatible with — myself.”

John eyed Finch with an evaluating eye. In his fifties, myopic, about ten pounds overweight. No muscle tone to speak of. He hadn’t been exercising lately, that was for sure. Finch gave him an annoyed look back. “I assure you, Mr. Reese, that

my physical fitness or lack thereof has absolutely no relevance to the amount of power the jaeger can exert. Without experiencing the control system myself, my attempts to work on it are — “ He made a frustrated, inarticulate gesture. “A man groping in a dark cave. I need to get *in* there. We built this prototype to be combat ready, but we haven’t even been able to trial it live, not since — “ He stopped. *Not since the first pilot died*, John supplied, mentally.

Finch didn’t continue that thought. Instead he said abruptly, “There are significant side effects of the process.”

“It doesn’t matter,” John said.

“I’m afraid it does,” Finch said. “I realize you’re prepared to die, Mr. Reese, but that’s only one of the potential outcomes, and by no means the most unpleasant.”

~ ~ ~

He led John out an airlock at the back of the lab that opened onto a startling explosion of color: humid air, lush green vegetation, blooming flowers, a painted backdrop, warm natural light. John blinked and stepped out. They were inside some kind of plexiglass tunnel looking out at an indoor jungle, some thirty chimpanzees moving around the enclosure on the other side. Two of them lazing by the wall and sharing a mango peered back at John with mild interest.

“It’s the complexity of the brain — specifically the sense of self — that makes tandem drift difficult,” Finch said. “Virtually any two mice can drift together, as long as they’re induced to have their thoughts run along similar lines — we teach them that a door with a particular symbol on it has a food reward on the other side, and then we show both of them the symbol, and that’s sufficient. By the time you get to chimpanzees, the success rate drops to twenty percent even after extensive training. With people, it plummets much further, but primate testing enabled us to identify the factors necessary for two people to get into drift together.”

“But not the ones that tell you if that’s going to kill them?” John said.

“Oh, it’s not going into drift that can kill you,” Finch said. “Failing to drift together simply dumps the two people into individual drift states, and that feels only like a state of near-sleep, with memories becoming unexpectedly vivid and intense. It can be unpleasant, particularly for anyone who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, but not life-threatening and not harmful, as far as we can tell. Success is the real danger.”

He gestured to the two chimpanzees eating their mango. “These were our first successful pair. Two pairs before them went into drift and successfully remained there for more than an hour with no apparent distress. But they became catatonic when they were taken out of drift, and all died within a week. This pair remained conscious and have stabilized, but — at a certain cost. They can’t endure separation. If one is taken from the other even briefly, they both become intensely upset. They’ve largely disconnected from the rest of the social group.”

John said blandly, “So you’re saying the downside is, after the drift you’re going to find me completely irresistible?”

“Assuming we don’t simply die coming out of it,” Finch said, with some asperity.

“About that — wouldn’t that put a little damper on your chances of improving the jaegers?” John said.

Finch turned to face him. “No,” he said quietly. “The observing team will be able to determine, based on our brain activity, whether we’re likely to survive coming out of drift. If we can’t — they’ll keep us in tandem drift indefinitely. And *that*, Mr. Reese, is the true risk I’m asking you to run.”

John was silent. Finch wasn’t wrong. He’d spent most of his life ready to die. He wasn’t afraid of it. Living, though — living tied up to another person, someone in his head all the time every minute of the day — and he’d be tied to Finch, who couldn’t be spared. John wouldn’t even be able to ask to be let go. “How would it *work*?”

“They’d remove the drift unit from the jaeger with us still inside it, and bring it to the lab,” Finch said. “The cables can maintain full-strength signal over thirty feet, so we’ll have full range of the room. There’s a bathroom, we’ll set up a privacy partition — “

He trailed off and shrugged minutely, his hands barely lifting from his sides. “The mechanics of the grotesque. I can’t tell you how long we’d have to endure it. As long as we could possibly stand, I suppose. My — heir is aware of the situation, and he’s prepared to continue the work from a financial standpoint, but there’s no one who can replace me on the technical side in any reasonable timeframe. And it won’t simply be a matter of getting the jaeger functional. We already have three Mark 1s in the preliminary manufacturing stage, and the Mark 2 design stage will begin as soon as we get real-world feedback from this one. My work won’t ever be finished, per se.”

“Okay,” John said, after a moment. “When do we start?”

Finch heaved a small sigh. "You'll need to detox. Will that be a problem?"

"No," John said.

"Two weeks to get you clean," Finch said. "Two weeks more for you to practice drifting alone. There will be various mental exercises you'll need to work through, which should make a successful tandem drift more likely. Then we'll make the attempt."

It had been six months between the other kaiju attacks. Four months left to go. "If this works —" John said.

"I'm aware of the timeframe," Finch said. "Yes, our goal is to be ready for a real-world trial by then."

"Okay," John said. "Then while I'm doing that, you're going to get into shape. Even if you're sitting in a cockpit, a fight with a kaiju isn't going to be a cakewalk."

Finch paused. Then he said, "All right," a little glumly. "I suppose I can't argue with that."

~ ~ ~

John spent the next week sweating out the liquor, mostly with water and exercise. A doctor came by his room the afternoon after Finch had gotten him settled in. John had showered; there were clean clothes waiting on the bed; he was shaving at the sink. "Come in," he said: a guy came in, young, looking like a hipster in jeans and a slouchy shirt under his white coat, but tired-eyed. John eyed him doubtfully: he looked all wrong, incongruous. Everyone else he'd seen here wore suits under their labcoats, if they weren't actually in coveralls and doing welding.

"Hey," the guy said. "I'm Will Ingram. And yeah," he added, with half a smile, "I'm really a doctor. I've got some Ativan for you, in case you start having withdrawal symptoms. You've only been drinking heavily for two months?"

By the time the kid left, John had gotten convinced of his competence, but the medicine stayed on the dresser anyway. The shakes didn't come, although the insomnia did. John didn't feel tempted to drink at all. He'd never really wanted to, it had only been an exit ramp slow enough not to feel like suicide. Throwing himself off a bridge had been too much like handing the kaiju a final victory.

When he couldn't sleep, when he was restless, when he couldn't focus on the mental exercises any longer, he jogged up the stairs on the jaeger scaffolding, all the way to the top and back. There were people always working on it, every hour

of the day: shifts working on complementary sections. He always stopped at the top and took a minute to go into the cockpit, to stand inside and feel the titanic weight all around him. At night he dreamed about it moving under his feet, like an earthquake.

Finch was almost always in the main control room, any time of day. John stopped in the back of the room to watch him sometimes, silently; Finch didn't seem to notice, or at least he didn't seem to mind. He had screens on either side of him with always-open videoconferencing, one to a team in Japan that was doing the hardware design, one to a team in China that was handling the manufacturing: they were apparently working on the Mark 1. Finch's own screen was full of code: the control interface. He'd type in a command, and on the other side of the windows, the jaeger's hands would slowly clench into a fist and open up again, over and over, until a graph of reaction time went up, dropping another few seconds with each new revision. Or he would run another diagnostic, and the whole cavern outside would go dark except for a string of lights going up one after another inside the jaeger's hull, like a Christmas display for giants.

John caught him at a workout a few days into his own new routine, when he went to the fitness center for weights. Finch was working with a personal trainer, a guy with gym muscles and way too much deference. "I'm taking over," John said, and shut down the treadmill. "Get down from there. We're going up the stairs."

From then on, he was with Finch eight hours a day. They didn't talk. Finch didn't have the breath: John was channeling memories of basic training, ratcheted down only a little. Whenever John let him go for a lunch break or the evening, Finch staggered back to his computer screen and sat staring at it blankly, too tired to even think. John didn't offer to cut back. None of Finch's work was going to matter for shit if he couldn't last an hour in the ring with a kaiju. Finch didn't complain, didn't try to get out of it. He did everything John told him to do.

The days were ticking away: towards the drift attempt, towards the next kaiju. In the refugee camp, people had talked about it endlessly: maybe there wouldn't be another one. The next one wouldn't come to the same region. The government would have come up with something by then. It wouldn't be as bad. Here, no one talked about it. They all knew another one was coming. They were the ones who had to come up with something.

~ ~ ~

The last day before the drift attempt, John took the elevator up out of the underground complex and went for a long solitary hike through the Cascades. The air was cold and the trails were empty. He climbed high enough to find a scenic overlook that looked out on the whole range stretching away from him, jagged peaks and a huge wide-open sky and silence: not another human voice. He took deep breaths of the air and shut his eyes. One way or another, after tomorrow he'd never have another moment of privacy, of solitude.

When he got back to his room, Finch was there, sitting on the bed. He'd given up the three-piece suits for workout gear over the last month, but tonight he was back in dark grey with subtle violet lines, a soft suede purple waistcoat. He looked as precise and neat as his schematics, not a line out of place. "I wanted to make clear —" he said abruptly.

"Understood," John said, before he could finish. "I'm not backing out."

Finch paused and inclined his head. "Then I'll see you in the morning," he said. He stood up stiffly: they looked at each other. John still found Finch's face mostly unreadable: exhaustion and mild grumpiness and pleasure all looked pretty much the same. Amusement was a raised eyebrow, so was annoyance; the distinction was all in the angle of his pursed mouth. But tonight there was something else, just barely showing. Fear.

"Are *you* sure?" John said, low.

Finch paused. "I've spent the better part of my life — all of my adult life, in fact," he said after a moment, "doing my very best to conceal everything about my identity, from my past to my name. There were things about me that even Nathan —" He stopped and pressed his mouth shut for a moment. "Even my closest friends didn't know the ordinary minutiae of my life. My address, my favorite color — I've kept secrets so long I keep them reflexively. But to answer your question, yes, I'm sure that I have to do this."

"You're also sure you don't want to," John said.

Finch didn't deny it.

"But you weren't hoping I'd say no," John said. He was sure of that. "You don't want me to back out."

"No," Finch said. "I don't have that species of cowardice."

"You're afraid it's not going to work," John said, finally understanding. "Because of you."

Finch heaved a short unhappy breath. "I had difficulty staying in drift at first," he said. "I — disliked having memories dredged up, the sense of a loss of control over my own mind." He made a small looping gesture with his hands. "That's why I wasn't —"

"The first pilot," John said. "Nathan."

"Yes," Finch said.

"He was your friend," John said softly.

"My friend," Finch said. "My partner, my — alter ego, really. We met at Berkeley, before we left and started working together..." He trailed off. "The day the first kaiju attacked," he said after a moment, "I was working — our headquarters were in San Jose. I was in a concealed office, without windows — I didn't even know when the building was evacuated. I felt the tremors, but I assumed it was just the usual minor earthquakes, nothing to be concerned about. Everyone else was fleeing the area, but Nathan came from a meeting on the other side of the city to find me and get me out. The helicopter took us out about fifteen minutes ahead of the kaiju. We had — a very good view."

John nodded slightly.

"He put together our consortium to build the jaegers," Finch said. "He wasn't a particularly gifted engineer, but he was a genius with people. He used every contact he had, got them to clear paperwork and bureaucracy out of the way — he had enough of a reputation to be given his head, particularly since we weren't asking for money. He found our partners in Yokohama and Guangdong."

"But it frustrated him tremendously that he couldn't do more on the technical side, particularly once we were up and running. When I had trouble getting into drift, he argued that he should be the first pilot — that he'd be able to convey any problems to me, identify what wasn't working well. We'd worked that way many times, and I — I agreed. Because I disliked the process."

"And if you hadn't," John said, "if you'd died, instead of him — would he have been able to get the tandem drift working?"

"Much of the implementation was done by the neuroscience team," Finch said, which wasn't a yes. He was silent a moment and then he said, "The concept was mine."

John nodded. "Then he didn't die for nothing."

"As long as it works," Finch said.

~ ~ ~

Everyone in the room was nervous: voices pitched too high, speaking too fast; several low angry exchanges going back and forth. The neuro team were moving around behind John's head, hands and arms coming in and out of his peripheral vision, the occasional tug on the transmitters attached to his temples and the base of his neck. The young doctor who'd brought him his meds was there, but not working; he had his hands shoved deep in his pockets and was standing by Finch's chair, his face drawn and unhappy. Finch looked over and up at him. "It's all right, Will," he said softly.

"I already lost my dad to this thing," Ingram said, and John abruptly put names together: Nathan Ingram, the founder of IFT. So that was where the nine billion dollars had come from.

"You've looked over all the data yourself," Harold said gently. "It's a risk worth running."

"Just — don't fry your brain, okay?" Ingram said. "I'm not even done being mad at you for lying to me all these years."

Finch gave him a brief, vanishing smile.

"We're ready," one of the doctors said, behind them.

Finch took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on the ceiling. John turned his own head up. "Ready," he said.

"Ready," Finch said.

The drop into drift was always like a free-fall, past faces and moments: Jessica turning away from him in an airport, the baby in his arms at Thanksgiving, Kara's mouth hard and hot on his in a bloody hotel room in Paris. The trick wasn't to ignore them; it was to let them slide by, not latching on to any of them. But there were other faces moving past him. A tall blond man in rolled-up shirtsleeves eating Chinese food across a desk, talking animatedly; the same man lying back in a chair just like the ones they were in, smiling easily, and then a brief terrible flash of his eyes mazed with blood and unseeing, dripping from his nose, blood on his own hands when he looked down. Blood on the floor, bodies slumped with gunshot wounds, a gun John had fired.

They slid through the red haze together. More images were coming by, faces John knew, faces he didn't, but he knew the ones he didn't know: he knew them all, knew their names and voices and everything about them. He let them go by and concentrated on the first of the mental exercises, rotating the gear-shape in his head. Abruptly he felt another lock into place with it, and they were in. His vision was clearing; he could hear again,

someone saying, "We've got confirmed tandem drift," oddly echoing in his head, and then a doctor was shining a flashlight in his eyes.

"Mr. Finch?" the doctor said. "Can you hear me?"

John stared up at the ceiling tiles, hearing Harold answer. He felt Harold's mind like another limb, the cool, sweet precision of it, new calculations already moving through, schematics and code unrolling, and beneath all of it, clear and hard as glass, *certainty*. "Mr. Reese!" one of the doctors said, and they were gathering around him. "What are his vitals? Mr. Reese, can you hear me? Are you in pain? Can you twitch your finger for me —"

"He's all right," Harold said. "He's fine." John blinked the tears away and turned his head in the cradle: Harold was looking back, his own eyes gentle. "He didn't entirely believe the jaeger was going to work."

"And now I know," John whispered. He didn't just know that Harold was sure; he *understood* why Harold was sure. He could follow the path of the calculations and the code, he had the complex engineering analyses settled neatly into the back of his head, ready to be referred to at any moment, the kaiju locked into cages built of diagrams and physics.

It wasn't anything like he'd expected. It was *transcendent*. "Tandem drift levels confirmed!" one of the doctors was saying, from the control table. "We're in the safe zone for detachment!" People started cheering, clapping; Will was slumping with relief into a chair. John looked at Harold and found him looking back, and knew it didn't really matter at all.

"Not that it won't be considerably more convenient," Harold said — no, *thought*, with an effort to return to brisk efficiency. It was failing. John grinned at him, and Harold gave up and took the invitation: he could feel Harold go browsing through him with the same hungry curiosity he'd felt himself. Harold paused among John's large mental catalogue of guns and weapons systems with bemusement. "The jaeger doesn't have any external weaponry, really — it's intended to cause direct physical trauma. I thought it best to err on the side of simplicity. But I wonder if we should diversify..."

John agreed. You wanted options, just not so many you wasted time choosing the best move. At least three or four, though. They started thinking about it in the back of their heads while they wandered on through each other. They both liked classic movies. They saw some pink things in slightly different shades. Harold had a deep reservoir of nitpicky knowledge about men's clothes, and also

he really *hadn't* wanted to put his tailor out of business: he was one of the few remaining clients since the kaiju attacks, and he'd started to buy more suits than ever to keep the man afloat. John eyed Harold narrowly. He did *not* need a new — oh, hell, all right.

"All right," one of the doctors said. "Let's go ahead and start with the synchronization tests. Put up the partition. Mr. Finch, we'll begin with you." A blackout panel slid down between them, and the doctors started showing Harold poses they wanted him to make.

"Hang on," John said. "There's a problem: I'm seeing them."

"What?" the doctor said.

"He's right," Harold said. "He's seeing the pictures you're showing me, through my eyes. We want to test truly shared motor control, not simply whether he can make the same movements at the same time."

"If you just move randomly," John said. Harold moved their left arms in a sweeping circle overhead, then raised their right legs. He held all their hands up and wiggled the fingers. John watched his body move, fascinated: it didn't feel creepy at all. It just felt like — breathing. "Can we stand up?" he asked.

They were helped carefully out of the chairs, the cabling extended out. The partition was still down. John took them through a light pilates routine to warm up, then a basic kata, then a complex one. Harold watched that time, letting him drive: he was mildly surprised that he wasn't falling over. John showed him how to center and balance from inside — it turned out that was a lot easier than trying to demonstrate it.

"All right," another one of the doctors said. "We should go ahead and detach now. We'll want to monitor your vitals and your brain activity for at least twenty-four hours —"

John felt an instinctive protest; Harold shared it. But it wasn't going to get any easier, Harold pointed out. "All right," he said, and they braced themselves.

~ ~ ~

They didn't go catatonic, and they didn't crash. Their vital signs stayed completely fine. They could talk in complete sentences and stand at opposite sides of the room, out of each other's view, with no hysterics. The doctors were jubilant, and one of the managers broke out some bottles of champagne. John waited out the rapidly developing party for ten minutes, watching the

clock, and then he slipped through the crowd, detached Harold, and pulled him out into the hallway.

They stood and stared at each other. "The stairs?" John offered. It felt wrong to have to talk out loud. Harold nodded.

They went all the way up to the head. For once, there was no one working. They slumped down on the edge of the control pit together to catch their breath. "I still can't describe it at all," Harold said after a moment. "Everything I imagine saying would just make it sound absolutely appalling. I'm sure it *looked* appalling, from the outside."

John spread out his hand and looked at it. Harold had moved it around, like a puppet master with a marionette. But it hadn't been like that. It had just been — Harold's hand, as much as his own. The same way Harold's body had been his: not an invasion but a sharing. He looked across the control pit at the blank screens where their eyes and ears would be, all their incoming data. "When do we drift again?"

"In twenty-four hours, I suppose," Harold said. He glanced down at the monitoring wrist cuff, the LEDs all lit steadily: pulse, blood pressure, temperature, wireless signal.

John nodded. Twenty-four hours wasn't too long. He could make twenty-four hours. Probably. "We should eat something and get some sleep," he said, and reached to pull Harold to his feet.

The party had spilled over into the mess hall by the time they got back down. Somebody was making instant cake in the microwave. Harold had a sweet tooth also: John remembered it with a distance that felt unnatural. He got two helpings while Harold loaded up their trays with dinner, and they retreated to Harold's room: a large suite with three laptops on the desk, and a couple of small overflowing bookshelves. John had never been inside before; it felt familiar anyway. They ate in silence at opposite ends of the desk.

Harold pushed back his tray finally — the cake was gone — and then he hesitated, looking over at the bed, his cheeks flushing slightly. John said roughly, "Yes," and pulled his shirt off over his head. Harold shut his eyes and heaved a breath and took off his own as well.

Sex was frustratingly good: closer, but not close enough. There was one moment, after John had come the first time: Harold got particularly bossy, shoving John's leg back and pushing him into position, moving him, and John shut his eyes and groaned before Harold even started to push in. It still didn't feel like drifting, but it was the next

best thing, Harold's skin against his, Harold's pulse inside him, the quick rhythm of his strokes. They went three rounds and finally managed to fall asleep from exhaustion, tangled up in a limp heap.

~ ~ ~

"We've got some unusual readings," Miranda Lin, one of the doctors, said, frowning at the screen the next morning, when they went in for the check-in. "The alarm didn't go off because the numbers are within the bounds for your elevated heartrate, to allow for exercise, but these were at night—"

"It's fine," John said.

"No, you don't understand," Lin said earnestly, as several other doctors converged on her station like a school of starving and anxious piranha. "You *both* experienced elevated heartrate at exactly the same time, for nearly the exact same duration —"

"Yeah," John said mildly. "It's *fine*."

"What?" The doctors all stared at him and then at Harold, who was wooden-faced with embarrassment. Will's eyes went appalled and wide.

"If we're ready to *move on*," Harold said, very pointedly, and everyone burst into a confused and awkward babble of agreement.

It took two hours to crane the control pod up to the jaeger head and hook it in. John had to fight himself not to jitter or fidget. Harold managed to lose himself in some code; John leaned against the desk next to him, looking out at the control room, people murmuring as they worked, checked numbers, made sure everything was fine, triple-checked. John recognized some of the ones who'd been here six months ago, when Ingram had died. He remembered their faces, pale and sick and horrified looking down at him, on the floor with Nathan's collapsed body in his arms. He remembered sobbing; he remembered them helping him gently to stand, easing him up, as they took Nathan away.

He reached out and put a hand on Harold's shoulder, and felt the hard thrumming tension there: so Harold wasn't losing himself all that effectively. John slid his hand onto Harold's neck and rubbed gently, working the knots in a small way. Harold breathed out under his touch, relaxing minutely.

Finally it was ready. They suited up, put on the heavy boots, stepped into the elliptical-style platforms and locked in. They gripped the hand stabilizers and the screens came up one after another: a full 360 view all around, and a dozen

overlays moving in and out. "*Ready*," someone said over the radio from the control room below. "Ready," Harold said. "Ready," John said.

"*Initiating drift*."

It was even better the second time — easier. They slid into tandem drift at once, memories just a smear of light and emotions going by quick: they both wanted to get *in* a lot more than they wanted to linger. Harold wondered if this was how it would be for everyone. "We're both somewhat — isolated. I wonder if it intensifies the experience."

John was too busy reveling in the feeling to spend much time dissecting it. Harold fit into him like a missing piece: they were together, they were one, a single entity with two bodies to work with, and then the control room said, "*Initiating jaeger control systems, left arm only*," and abruptly they had *another* arm too, an arm like a piledriver, limitlessly strong.

"Oh, how strange," Harold murmured, and they slowly and gently lifted it, brought that titanic hand up in front of their face, and closed it into a fist.

~ ~ ~

No one wanted to take risks this time. The tests were all showing halved neural load, just as expected, but even so the team went by cautious creeping steps. A week for each limb, and another one just to turn the head gently from side to side. Then a week for both legs together, marching in place, up and down, with the arms dangling inert, and afterwards endless tests every day, anything the doctors could possibly imagine to test: John's inner elbows turned into a battlefield of blood-draw punctures. A week for both arms and the head together. And after that, finally, ten minutes with all systems live, the jaeger another body to share. It was exhilarating, a savagely satisfying feeling, the jaeger's power something they felt as *part* of them, even just walking in place, moving through a slow pirouette that didn't so much as scrape the walls. But afterwards, the doctors insisted on a week off, entirely, to do full PET scans of their brains and see if any damage showed up anywhere.

John could handle it by then. Drifting together almost every day for two months had settled the most urgent hunger for it. He still missed it badly, but it was a week without eating instead of a week without breathing. They worked out and worked. Harold was ripping ten and twenty seconds at a time off their — the jaeger's — reaction speeds now, cleaning up any pathways that had felt slow or halting. John had started talking to the team in Japan about weapons: a couple of big shoulder-

mounted missiles that could soften a kaiju up at a distance before closing; a chest-mounted set of railguns, in case of grappling. He spent the nights curled around Harold in their bed, drowsing, making love, listening to Harold read aloud. And knowing that at the end of the week, the gloves would come off. They'd be taking the jaeger topside, and after that, it was going to be outright combat practice, every day until — until they had something to fight for real.

“One more month,” he said softly, his head in Harold's lap, Harold's fingers stroking him absently as he turned the pages. He'd forgotten to keep reading out loud. John didn't nudge him. The PET scans had come back clean: they were on tomorrow. He'd catch up then.

“Yes,” Harold said. “We're going to have company, by the way: we told the Pentagon we're ready to give them a demonstration, and they're taking us up on it.”

John grunted acknowledgement.

The Pentagon team came in by helicopter, and the principals were a woman named Alicia Corwin and a weasel-faced man named Denton Weeks. John pegged them as intelligence before the handshakes were over: they weren't here to see a weapon that could stop the kaiju, they were here to get a look at what kind of technology Harold was putting together, and, John would bet, trying to dig up a reason to shut down his entire consortium. They were the kind of people still worrying about sharing intel with China and Japan. They had a Marine officer with them, a tall, powerfully built black man who looked young for his rank, with two Kaiju Stars that meant he'd seen combat in both U.S. attacks: but even so he was only a major and irritated, obviously saddled with token military representative duty: he looked around the bare complex with a hard mouth, and swung a glowering gaze at John.

John met his look straight on and as they fell in to follow Harold to the observation deck, he said quietly, “Just so you know, sir, this isn't bullshit.”

Pentecost cut his eyes sideways at him. “Is that so.” He had a British accent, a little soft around the edges: probably he'd been here on officer exchange when the first kaiju had landed. It said something that he'd chosen to stay. He glanced John up and down. “Former military?”

“First SFG,” John said. “But I spent the last ten years mostly working for people like them.” He jerked a chin towards Corwin and Weeks, up ahead.

“And now you're working for *him*,” Pentecost said, looking at Harold.

“He's the real thing,” John said.

“You sure about that?”

“Pretty sure,” John said dryly, and held the door to the control room: it had been brought up to the ground again. The entire hangar building was already retracting, roof and walls rolling up into the ground, leaving only the skeleton of joints up; then those folded themselves down too.

“Mr. Reese and I will be going down to the control pod now,” Harold said. “You can watch our progress through the monitors.” He touched a screen and it lit up, a camera following them. “Dr. Sung will explain the jaeger control system, and Dr. Levin will cover the tandem drift process. You'll be able to observe the entire initialization procedure, but I ask you to please reserve any questions until we're fully up and running: at that point we'll be able to speak with you from the cockpit.”

They could have been listening in, so John didn't say anything to Harold while they went down. The team had built a short staircase down to the jaeger cockpit from the ground floor, with a prep room at the bottom. They suited up into the new gear that had come in from manufacturing three days ago: lightweight body armor with power supports that could keep you standing even if you were asleep, a long insulating stripe along the spinal column to improve signal processing. Harold threw him a frowning glance, a question in his face; John shook his head slightly: not now. They stepped through the door and onto the retractable platform to the jaeger's head.

John locked his boots into the platforms and pulled on the helmet as it lowered from above. The screens were coming up all around them: the full view, a window looking into the control room. Corwin had her arms folded across her chest, skepticism visible; Weeks was just wearing a small polite smile. Pentecost was leaning against the back wall of the room, expressionless, watching.

Sung leaned forward to the microphone. “*Initiating drift*,” she said, and John closed his eyes until *he* became *them*, Harold's mind warm and bright easing against his own, calm with sure confidence: he had no doubts about the success of the demonstration.

John didn't either: he was worried about what happened next. “You know those guys aren't friendly.”

Harold did know. “Mr. Weeks and his unit have been trying to hack into our systems for the

past two years, since Nathan first talked the administration into allowing us to set up the consortium.” They were already powering up the jaeger systems. It wasn’t like talking and working at the same time; in drift, it was less a conversation than a shared train of thought. “But on the other hand, that will make them exceptionally powerful advocates once convinced.”

“Only if they don’t go back, lie to get us shut down, and try to seize control of the entire project themselves,” John thought.

Harold understood that they might want the credit, for any number of reasons. “But they could hardly make a convincing argument that they were responsible if a project they took over today was fully combat-ready a month later — “ The thought slowed and stopped. “You don’t really think they’d — “

“Let another couple cities get taken out by the next attack, so they could take the credit for stopping the one after that? Yeah. I’m not saying they *would*. But I wouldn’t be too quick to put it past them, either.” Harold was resisting, a weird sensation: John could feel him not wanting to even have the thought. John pushed it, gently. “Odds are, some other country is in line to take the next hit, and these guys have spent all their lives telling themselves a story about what people matter. About how you can murder someone and call yourself a hero and a patriot for it. And once you start telling yourself that story, it — it takes a lot to make you stop.”

John knew Harold had already seen the truth of that, felt it in the drift. There wasn’t a way to hide the things you were ashamed of. But Harold had looked at those parts of him, the things he’d done, with sorrow and pity, and more than that with a total lack of comprehension. John was pretty sure that if he put a gun in Harold’s hand and shoved him in a room with someone trying to kill him, the first thing Harold would do was put the gun down.

Harold disagreed, mildly: he wasn’t a *romantic*. He’d hold on to the gun as a deterrent, and try and make the other person talk things through — not to mention that in practice, the addition of a gun to a hostile confrontation rather increased than decreased the potential for deadly violence — statistics started to roll out in their head, until John nudged them back onto the main line of thought. Harold a little unhappily conceded John had a point, and in any case agreed they couldn’t take the chance. “But for now, I think it’s time we demonstrated why this project would even be worth their attention in the first place,” he added.

John smiled, and felt Harold smiling with him. “All systems go, Control,” Harold said out loud.

“Roger that,” Dr. Sung said. “All systems go. We’re opening the roof.”

Sunlight poured in as the hangar floor cracked open overhead, retracting. The helicopters were overhead, dropping the smart clamps to the delivery team. John felt them locking in, one after another, all around the hull. “We’re good to go,” he said. “Take us up.”

The camera had been showing the jaeger cockpit to the people in the control booth, and they’d seen the schematics. But their faces changed as they watched the jaeger coming up out of the ground: Corwin’s arms unfolded, her face going rigidly controlled, eyes widening. Weeks rocked back on his heels, mouth pursing, and put his hands in his pockets. Pentecost pushed himself off the back wall and come straight up to the front windows, looking up, and he didn’t budge even when Dr. Sung tentatively tried to suggest he move back so he could see the system readings on her screen as well as watch.

The helicopters took them clear of the hangar and put them down in the center of the open lot — carefully, but the asphalt cracked slightly underfoot anyway. John and Harold detached the clamps and waited for them to be retracted. After the copters cleared the area, they turned to face the control room: three steps to get turned around, each one within the target timeframe, under 2 seconds from impulse to movement complete.

“We’re going to go through a basic kata first,” John told the control room.

Harold was a solid supportive presence, but paying more attention to the internal readings. He particularly wanted to see how the jaeger’s systems handled the more elaborate moves they were about to make: the jaeger wasn’t balanced quite exactly like a human body, but the system was supposed to translate for them, let them feel the tolerances of the jaeger’s body mapping to their own. This would of course be the first real full-body test of that system —

John decided to skip the formal bow. “And hopefully I’m not about to dump us on our ass,” he muttered.

He didn’t dump them. There were a couple of places in the kata where things didn’t feel quite right and he backed off, Harold already sketching out code fixes, but for the most part every move went easily. The hardest part was time. The sheer distances the jaeger’s limbs had to travel made it feel like he was pretending to move in slow-motion while the jaeger moved at full speed. “Would it help to be working against resistance?” Harold wondered, envisioning a kind of body framework,

equipment that they could physically push against that would resist them just the right amount and for the right length of time to slow them to jaeger-time.

In the meantime, John imagined moving through water, focused on control instead of speed, and moved into the next sequence, one he'd designed himself. He'd been watching footage of the kaiju attacks, studying analysis of the way they moved and their anatomy, and he'd been coming up with good strikes and blocks to use against them. Harold talked the control room through it while John moved. "Given the thickness of the brain case, head blows like these will mostly be useful early in a fight — they're intended to target the eyes and the ears, and hopefully cause disorientation and pain, as well as opening up additional targets in the torso. We've observed that the kaiju react defensively to protect their eyes by turning away — Dr. Haneko, I believe you can show them the footage — exposing several vulnerable spots along the flank."

John finished the second head blow with both hands meeting, clasped them, and pulled them down in a hard cross-body strike. "Given that behavior," Harold said, "this particular blow should ideally impact an organ we're calling the kaiju's secondary digestive sac: it holds acids used to dissolve metals the kaiju ingests, and is among the more vulnerable parts of its body. A hard blow could cause it to rupture, spilling those acids into the kaiju's abdominal cavity. We believe this is what occurred late during the Manila attack, when the fourth missile strike penetrated the hide and exploded, and the kaiju immediately showed signs of extreme distress and its range of motion grew severely constrained. Apart from the fighting advantage this offers, we're fairly certain that such an injury alone will kill the kaiju within two hours. It's therefore another early target."

John pulled back from the move: time for a throw, he thought. "This is intended to be performed while executing a hold on the kaiju," Harold said. John gripped his hands around in front and pushed off both legs, getting a good thirty feet into the air, and turned halfway around before they smashed back to earth, the whole complex shuddering with the impact.

"Jesus," Corwin said involuntarily, half under her breath.

"While we'd obviously want to avoid this maneuver in any populated area, forcing the kaiju to support the weight of the jaeger is likely to destabilize it," Harold said. "The jaeger can recover more quickly from a wider range of positions than a kaiju, making moves of this sort a useful tactic."

There wasn't a lot of conversation after the demo. Harold offered Weeks and Corwin a tour of the facility that cleared them out of the way; John offered Pentecost a look at the fighting routines he was sketching out for the jaeger. He waited until the control room had slid down out of sight, and then he turned to Pentecost and said, "Or, if you want, we could take a look inside."

Pentecost hadn't said a word, but there was an intensity in his eyes. "Lead the way," he said.

They went down the stairs and into the jaeger cockpit. Pentecost walked around the small space, touched the surfaces lightly, his eyes roving over the blank screens, the handful of controls. "You've been up against them," John said. "What do you think of our chances?"

He didn't answer right away. "Don't think they're stupid," Pentecost said finally. "Not for a second. You know why they hit population centers? They're *looking* for them. Anytime they're out in open ground, they follow the biggest highways they can see. They're not dumb animals."

He turned to face John, shoulders straight, hands clasped behind his back, eyes narrow. "You're slower than they are, and those joints look vulnerable. They get some leverage on a limb, get you on the ground long enough to jump on you, I think you're dead. You need to win a fight fast, or you won't win it at all."

"That's the idea," John said. "We're fighting on our own territory. The fight goes a long time, we've already lost."

"Can you get it faster?"

"Mark 1 is going to be a general twenty percent improvement," John said. "Harold thinks he can get the Mark 2 down an effective sixty percent by specializing for different conditions, assuming we get the funding to build at least twenty of them."

Pentecost nodded. "What do I think of your chances?" He looked back around the cockpit. "Better than anything else I've seen. By a long shot. When are you combat-ready?"

"If a kaiju came out of the water today, we'd go," John said. "But we could use some serious practice, especially submerged. I was wondering if you might be able to swing us clearance to head down to one of the Marine bases — Miramar or Camp Pendleton."

Pentecost raised an eyebrow. "*You're* asking?"

John looked at him. "You heard Dr. Levin tell you about tandem drift. He couldn't tell you what it's really like, though. When you're in there, in drift

— you're one person. When I'm asking, Harold's asking too."

"Hm." Pentecost studied him. "And why are you asking *me*?"

"Because quite frankly, I don't trust Weeks half as far as I can throw him, and I want more momentum behind this project before he comes up with an angle on it," John said.

After a long moment, Pentecost's mouth twitched up at one corner. "It so happens I've served out of Camp Pendleton the last three years," he said, and took out his cell phone. "Miranda?" he said after a moment. "This is Major Pentecost. Would you ask General Rodriguez if he can give me a minute for something urgent?"

"Thanks," John said quietly, while they waited for the general to come on the line.

Pentecost glanced at him. "Don't thank me. I'm expecting something in return." John raised his eyebrows. "If this thing works, you'll be needing more pilots."

~ ~ ~

Half an hour after the car pulled out, carrying a smiling, smiling Weeks, all of Harold's helicopters were refueled and back in the air, dropping the clamps down to the jaeger.

"Pack up everything you can and get office space in San Diego as close to the Marine base as you can," Harold was saying to Will, who was standing in the control room with his hands shoved in his pockets looking at them. John was handling the clamp checks, but he had a moment to glance over at him, feeling the warmth and deep intensity of Harold's love, the touch of regret and sorrow. "Possibly buy some factories if you can find them, or any ground that looks useful — we'll need all the manufacturing capacity we can possibly get in any case."

"Got it," Will said. "I'll see you down there. Don't drop this thing on San Diego."

"We'll do our best," John said. "We're clear to go."

He punched in the route and fed it to the pilots as they got aloft. "Uh, sir," the lead pilot said over the radio, "I'm pretty sure that's going to be in view of I-5."

"I don't care if we have to come in over downtown LA, we're taking the straightest shot down," John said, instead of explaining that was in fact the point.

The honking followed them all the way, and by the time they hit San Diego, they had a cautious

escort of seven news helicopters, staying well back. Harold had been monitoring the Internet: there were a dozen livestreams and photos everywhere. John smiled grimly with him as they came into Pendleton airspace and a flotilla of Marine helicopters showed up to hold back the news crews.

General Rodriguez clearly meant to be wildly pissed off right up until the jaeger actually hit the ground in front of him. He and his people were the ones who'd finally taken out the Bay Area kaiju, granted after the thing had taken a hell of a pounding already, and they'd also been in at the end of the Seattle one. He'd seen it personally, and he'd lost a lot of men. Instead of yelling, he stood in complete silence, his face on the screen looking rigid and locked, and then all he said was, "Right. We need to give this thing a shakedown?"

The next three weeks blurred into one long stretch. When they weren't in mock combat, they were working on the systems, designing battle plans, collecting still more intelligence on the kaiju from the men who'd fought them. They mostly lived in the cockpit, and they only came out of drift to sleep. Even then, it almost didn't feel like they'd left. John had Harold's dreams sometimes, glimpses of Nathan and Will and flowing endless seas of code. Harold had his, a hundred places across the world, people dying at his hands.

John wasn't alone very often. Will Ingram came onto the base two weeks later with a team of the collaborators getting ready to build the Mark II. After the demo, Harold went to dinner with them to talk low-level routines, and John had a few hours to himself. He went for a jog along the beach. He could see the jaeger from a long way off, standing like a massive sentinel at the water's edge. He stopped at a snack bar a couple miles down the sand: there were dozens of them, shacks catering to the crowds of tourists coming to watch the jaeger demos. He ordered a bottle of water and put a couple dollars on the counter.

The guy on the other side handed him a cold bottle dripping ice and pushed the bills back. "Sorry, man," he said quietly. "Your money's no good here."

John blinked at him. The guy — a kid, really; couldn't have been eighteen yet — shrugged. "My father's stationed at the base," he said. "Pointed you out to me the other day."

"Thanks," John said, bemused. He took his bottle and went to the railing overlooking the ocean: it was deserted; all the tourists were crammed along the one facing the jaeger.

A voice said, "You're looking better than the last time I saw you."

John turned. "Kara."

She was holding a small ice cream cone, smiling faintly. John felt the absence of a gun, a knife, anything, like a missing limb. He forced himself not to look away from her, even though he badly wanted to scan the area, identify how much support she had. He was angry with himself, furiously angry. He'd let himself stay in Harold's mind, Harold's world, where everyone was pulling together to build the jaegers, where ego didn't matter and all other considerations vanished next to the need to save people. He wanted to be in that world; he'd forgotten to worry about the other one. His world, where Denton Weeks had watched the jaeger flying down to San Diego on national TV and fumed, because now he couldn't *use it*; where phone calls had been made and Kara had been sent here, probably with a team, to get at the one critical point of vulnerability a jaeger had: the pilots.

He had a moment of gut-clenched fear: *Harold*. He forced it down. Will and Harold had stayed on the base. Kara wouldn't have tried him here if she'd had a better option.

"You don't call, you don't write," she said, mocking. She looked over at the jaeger in the distance. "You don't want to share your toys."

"Looks to me like it's the other way around," John said sharply. "Kara, listen to me. They can't find pilots for this thing all that easily—"

"Oh, I know," she said. "I figured that much out when I heard you'd been recruited out of the refugee tanks."

"The next kaiju's due in a *week*," John said. "You know how many people it's going to kill —"

"John, John, John," she said, shaking her head. She tossed the rest of her cone in the trash and wiped her fingers. "You know better. I don't question orders."

John clenched his jaw. "I'm not going with you," he said.

"The easy way or the hard way, John. You choose." Four other men were coming out of the crowd behind her, hard-faced, wary. He spotted the smoked-window SUV they had waiting at the end of the boardwalk, only a few yards away. He wondered if he threw himself over the railing, dived deep enough, he could get away, swim back.

"Please," Kara said, rolling her eyes, and flipped her coat back to show him the taser on her left

hip. And she'd use it, too: she'd use it even if it meant he drowned, and he had to live. He had to live. Two of the men were on either side of him, reaching for his arms.

"Hey!" John looked over. The kid at the snack bar was frowning his way. "Hey, man, you okay?" he called.

John stared at him.

Kara turned, frowning, and said, "Mind your own —"

"Hey!" the kid was yelling at the bored cop on the rail, already yanking off his apron and climbing over his own counter. "Hey! Officer! That guy's one of the jaeger pilots!"

The tourists were turning, staring at him. The boardwalk cop was running towards them. John ducked under one guy's arm and punched the other, kicked the legs out from under a third. The fourth one slammed a doubled fist against his temple, though, and John staggered to his knees, seeing stars. Kara narrowed her eyes. "Get him to the car," she said, and turned around, pulling her gun. "No!" John shouted, but she fired, and the cop went down.

People were screaming. She fired two warning shots into the air, and people were cowering away from her. The guys heaved John up to his feet, and then someone shouted, "They're trying to kidnap him!"

"Keep back," Kara said flatly, sweeping the gun around, and John saw people staring at them, at her, on the other side of it; and he had one moment when he knew; a moment for tears to gather, to start sliding down his face. Then the whole crowd was surging in towards them, as one, and he was in Harold's world; this was Harold's world, after all.

~ ~ ~

Epilogue

He woke up. Harold was asleep beside him and the green military clock in their quarters said 0214. John sat up and rubbed his face and stretched a little, testing for soreness. It was pretty much gone. He'd gotten more bruises from the rescue than the attack, and he didn't mind any of them. The doctors — the dozen doctors — had all finally, grudgingly conceded he didn't have a concussion.

He looked at the clock again, and around the dark silence of the room. Two more days left. He lay down to sleep again, but he didn't close his eyes. There was something happening. He listened: the sound of rotors. He got up and went to the window. The helicopter pad was lit up, and the dozen jaeger-transport copters were starting their engines. John turned into the room and knelt next to Harold's side of the bed and stirred him awake. The knock came a moment later, a Marine private at the door, shaved head and crisp dress uniform.

"Sir," he said, saluting.

Harold sat up behind him in the bed, yawning. "What is it?"

"It's here," John said. The private nodded. "Tell the general we're on our way. Where is it headed?"

"Straight-line course would take it to Tokyo, sir. ETA twenty-one hours."

John got into his suit and turned to help Harold with his; he was fumbling with the chest seal. "Yes, all right, we should have drilled for this," Harold muttered. John just smiled faintly and fixed the neck collar so it lay smooth, and they were on their way.

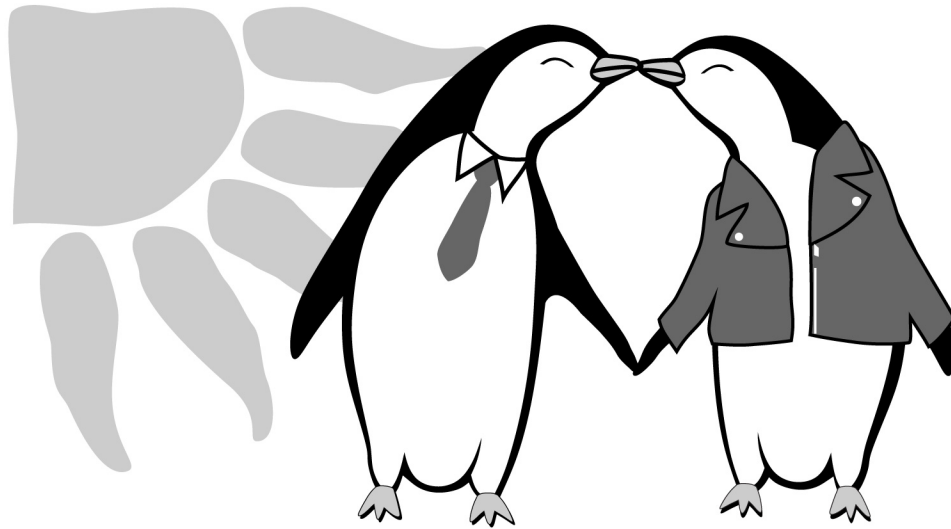
Someone handed them cups of coffee and a stack of power bars as they stepped into the cockpit lift. John put them in reach on the console, and he climbed into the harness and hooked in. Harold was talking to the anxious operations crew, most of them with strawstack-messy hair, some still in pajamas. "No," he was saying. "We'll stick with the current firmware. No last-minute changes. Dr. Sung, if you see anything unexpected in the readings, don't hesitate to alert me or ask questions no matter the circumstances, even during combat. If anything should go wrong, it will be absolutely critical that you obtain as much data from the experiment as possible."

Sung nodded, a small movement; they all knew that meant if Harold didn't come back. Harold looked at Will. Will stuck his hands in his pockets and tried to smile and said, "Go get 'em, Uncle Harold." Harold smiled back at him, a quick flicker of movement, and then he stepped into the harness. The video window closed, and it was just the front viewscreen, the schematics, all the console readings; it was just the two of them.

"*Ready to initiate drift on your mark,*" Dr. Levin's voice came over the radio, and John glanced once more at Harold, Harold looking back, his eyes warm, unafraid.

"Let's go," John said. The end of the world was headed for Tokyo, and they were going to stop it.





The Plan

by Natasha Solten

Editor's Notes

Wiseguy, the series that introduced episode arcs and bad guys we couldn't hate. One bad guy in particular, Sonny Steelgrave, captured the hearts and imaginations of pretty much every *Wiseguy* fan. Sonny's love for Vinnie? And Vinnie's for Sonny? That *is* canon. Some stuff that happened in the canon after that love was established? It's part of why fandom exists.

The Plan

by Natasha Solten

They were supposed to be fighting. He and Vinnie. That was the plan.

The event for the evening was at the Catholic Church in the Bronx where Joey Bags once ruled, near where Sonny Steelgrave grew up on Arthur Street. It was old territory. Sonny and his gumba Mahoney as well as many other kingpins of the east coast underworld always attended this local, annual celebration out of respect.

Tonight, making inroads to merge the Baglia and Steelgrave families by courting Joey's daughter Theresa Baglia, Sonny intended to wine and dine her with sweet, city-boy charm, as was his fashion. They'd known each other since they were kids. He had a great affection for her. She understood and accepted his distinguished predilections and business practices. Things could work out well between them. Mutual affection would be enough to cement a marriage. He did not think about more. Pushing 35 years old, he'd almost given up on finding true love.

As he flirted with Theresa in the alcove of the church's kitchen, he never lost awareness that Vinnie was watching him from a red-checked covered table behind a glass of red wine.

He could almost taste that wine the way he preferred it, more tart than sweet.

If looked at closer, the scene's truth told of an unglamorous stage of actors, all the men in suits defining proper behavior, all the women in elegant dresses and high heels hanging back near the kitchen where often greater secrets were kept beyond those of underworld, nefarious dealings.

Everyone in attendance tonight had secrets. The room was made of them. Was anything here as it actually appeared?

The lights were fluorescent and hard, the floor scratched linoleum, the walls painted uneven beige, but the wine was high end, the cologne scents wafting throughout the vast hall were

designer, and most of the people on this stage owned, in combined wealth, possibly enough to make even the Vatican forgive all the hidden sins here this evening.

Not only was Vinnie watching him, but Sonny felt eyes from Scalisi, Patrice's stand-in man for the night, as well as many of the others in attendance. Everyone wanted to know what the deal was with him and Theresa. They were all careful to see if anyone planned to expand territories, or grow their power from a simple kiss to a mob-daughter into a liaison with a family from "old blood."

Yeah, Sonny had plans. Too many to count. Patrice on the end of a noose was one, although Vinnie could not know about that one or he'd try and stop him. And as for his plans for Vinnie, well, the flutter in his gut reminded him that after he got everything in order with the east coast underworld, Vinnie would come first. Always. He'd give the guy anything he wanted. It had been that way from the beginning.

The smells from the kitchen wafted out the open door, roasted chicken and marinara sauce and pasta in a tangy steam, along with sugary currents of freshly baked pies and cakes.

While Vinnie watched him, Sonny charmed the laughter from Theresa, snaring her for his own, and felt a rush of power.

But as Sonny flattered Theresa, Vinnie's intense blue eyes snared him, as always, and he made his way over to him, forgetting for a moment that they wanted to show these people they were not getting along. That Vinnie might be open to an idea of defection to Paul "Pat the Cat" Patrice from New York City.

As Sonny approached, he noted how Vinnie's dark hair took on an inner light from even the most garish of fluorescents, how the diamond on his left hand (a ring Sonny had given him) drew a pink glaze from the reflections of the wine glass he held,

how his eyes seemed slightly down-turned and shimmering as he looked up. Almost sad.

An immediate empathy opened up in Sonny, rare for him but coming less rare these days when he was around Vinnie. These feelings he had, this connection to his handsome right hand man, was a treat, and more. Sonny liked the swirling warm surges Vinnie inspired in him. He basked in the newness of that sensation, often barely realizing how it might look to others as he pulled this man closer and closer to him a little too quickly for their comfort. The old guard never stopped questioning his choices, his decisions. Making Vinnie a “made” man should have, but did not, quell the confusion and distrust. It only increased it.

If he could merge his interests with Joey Baglia’s family, everything could change. His rivals might find other more dangerous men to spy on. And Sonny would be freer to act on his instincts, and his more personal, Vinnie-inspired whims.

He was feeling good as he sat beside Vinnie, both their gazes following Theresa in her pale blue dress.

Vinnie made her a nice compliment. Sonny, proud to hear it, let his guard down for a moment and admitted his mood. “Yeah, I think I’ll marry her,” he said glibly. He often confessed his heart to Vinnie too easily, as well as most of his plans. Even the private ones. Vinnie was with him on this plan involving Theresa one hundred percent in every way. So when the insult came from Vinnie’s lips in Vinnie’s voice, something about the cow and the milk, Sonny bristled. It wasn’t like Vinnie, who had somehow retained his heart even in the darkest of places, to be so mean. And he was never like that with women.

Then he remembered. They were supposed to be fighting. Him and Vinnie. That was the plan.

He called himself an idiot in both English and Italian, then played up his anger, watching Vinnie’s face just to make sure Vinnie, too, had been acting. But of course he was. Vinnie was as loyal as they came. That innocent face belied a fiery intellect. Vinnie could be a formidable opponent. But right now all that face communicated was apology.

Still, Sonny kicked him outside. “Get out!” he commanded in a raised voice. They made it look real good to the onlookers and spies. For Sonny’s plan to work, he and Vinnie needed to be at odds.

Vinnie went off for awhile, playing the affronted guy with an amusingly spoiled annoyance, but even that glum face tugged at Sonny’s heart. He

did spoil the guy, that was for sure. It was just that Vinnie had never given him that look before.

When dinner was served, Vinnie was back and seated next to Sonny. They traded glares. He couldn’t show it, but Sonny was glad for the warmth beside him. His hands twitched with a desire to reach out. Vinnie wouldn’t have minded. Sonny was always touching him on the back or shoulder in public, thrilled when Vinnie leaned into the touches and met his eyes.

When the evening finally ended, and all the limos went their separate ways, Sonny and Vinnie rode for almost two hours toward home in Sonny’s town car, silently aware of their driver up front who must also be made to believe the two of them were not getting along.

Off and on, Sonny dozed.

When they arrived at the Royal Diamond Casino, still desperately silent, they entered the elevator together.

Once the doors closed, Sonny finally spoke. “I have a couple of things I have to do in my office.”

It was late. Still, Vinnie looked at him from under loose, shining bangs and said, “I’ll come with you.”

Once in the office, Vinnie went to his customary position on the couch while Sonny turned on his computer.

Fifteen minutes later, Sonny declared, “There. Finished.”

Vinnie put down the evening paper and rose, coming over to his desk.

Sonny looked at him standing there serene, beautiful and waiting. Before he stood, he said, “Just one more thing.”

“What?”

“You insulted Theresa.”

“We’re supposed to be fighting.”

“And that’s what you came up with? It could’ve been politics, business, philosophy. You’re good at that philosophy stuff. You could’ve made me look real stupid and mad.”

Vinnie studied him intently for a moment. Sonny lifted his chin, liking the attention.

Vinnie said, “You know why I picked on Theresa for show?”

Sonny shook his head.

“Because if I look like I’m not with you on this, on matters of your heart, it looks real bad. For us. It looks like I don’t care about you. Or maybe that I’m jealous. Like I want your position or something.”

“Do you?”

“Sonny! Dammit. No.” He frowned, then softer, “No.”

“Ah, I know that.” Sonny’s chest released a bit of tension just then. But he had to ask. “You’re not jealous of her, are you?”

“No. I mean, well, it’s a great plan, you know. I’ve never even been close to marriage myself.” He played with the diamond on his left little finger.

Turning away, Sonny said, confessing far too easily again, as if this man were priest, angel and best friend all in one, “I don’t love her, you know.”

Vinnie’s arm lifted and he scratched the back of his head. He looked away. “I pretty much guessed not.”

Sonny got up. “Hey. I don’t like this. I don’t like fighting, not even if it’s pretend. Not with you.”

The smile on Vinnie’s lips grew soft. He thought Vinnie was going to laugh at him again, but instead, he said quietly, “It was your plan.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” He had so many plans. Too many to count. He waved his hand through the air as if that gesture alone could end or change the subject.

“I...” Vinnie stopped. “I don’t like it, either.”

Sonny watched the angles of his face in the downtown city light streaming through the window, the way the shades of gold and tan and beige shifted over the smooth skin and colored the dark hair with softer tones of amber and topaz.

“Sonny...”

Again, the hand wave. “It’s okay. I’m happy. With all our plans. Really. We do what we have to do, right? For the job?” He wanted to wink at him, make it a joke, but the job was still a heavy burden that existed between them. Both their jobs.

An absent look came over Vinnie as he nodded, echoing him. “Yeah. For the job.”

“So we’re clear on all this, right?” Was that a slight tremble in his own voice? Freakin’ FBI. Subverting a man like Vinnie Terranova, dragging him into that web of bureaucracy and lies... he’d ice every fed whose name he knew, if he didn’t think Vinnie would hold it against him.

“Right.”

The moment Sonny moved forward through the etched shadows, the soft carpet cushioning the soles of his feet, the air flickering with tiny sparks from the added moisture in his eyes as he let his guard down all the way, Vinnie walked forward, too.

They met evenly, gracefully, neither bumping nor awkward, Sonny’s hands moving up over Vinnie’s shoulders, Vinnie’s going tightly around his waist. Bodies pressed. Arms squeezed.

Sonny pushed his face into Vinnie’s neck. Vinnie leaned his head against Sonny’s shoulder. For long moments they clung, hearts speeding up, breaths catching. Sonny breathed in Vinnie’s scent as if it were a long held-back season: rain and earth and sky. It both lifted him up and grounded him, a direct complement to his own insubstantial, dark and dream-like existence.

Up until this past year of his life, Sonny had given up on finding true love. Until he’d met Vinnie.

He raised one hand to the back of Vinnie’s neck, his fingers threading through the silken hair of his lover. He turned his head to the side and placed a lingering kiss on the underside of Vinnie’s jaw.

Vinnie sighed in response. The sound of his pleasure sent darts of impending ecstasy throughout Sonny’s body. He pulled Vinnie’s head closer until their cheeks rubbed, until they could feel each other’s breaths flame against their faces. Lips trailing up one cheekbone, Sonny whispered, “No more pretending tonight.”

“No more,” Vinnie agreed.

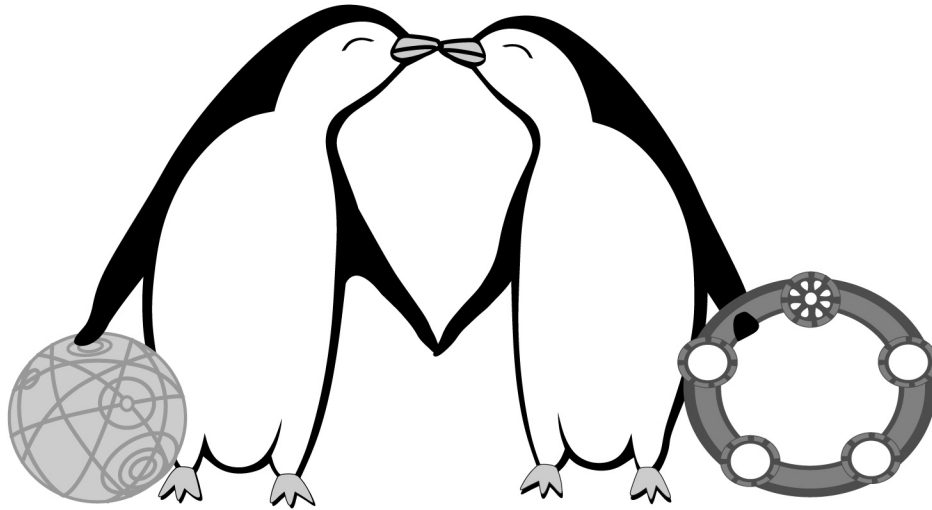
Their mouths met, hungry, searching, longing. In their intimate frenzy, it seemed they could never get close enough.

And that was how it always was with them, almost from the beginning.

Every night they sneaked into Sonny’s bedroom, locked the doors against the cold world of La Familia, and pulled the blinds on the FBI.

Love un-weighted, immeasurable, became their supreme and ever-lasting plan.





Pseudacris Crucifer
by Franzeska

Editor's Notes

Franzeska is a self-proclaimed “inveterate small fandoms person.” *Veritas: the Quest*, with its Indiana Jones-like focus on the magic and mysteries buried in archeology, is no exception. Franzi weaves the series canon into her—well, let’s not spoil it, shall we?

Pseudacris Crucifer

by Franzeska

VERITAS BUILDING, NEW YORK - FRIDAY,
10:25pm

“Dorna,” Solomon ground out. It was hard to speak with his cheek pressed into the door.

Vincent chuckled. Warm breath tickled Solomon’s neck. Had he always sounded so sinister? “I’m afraid so,” he said. “But you knew that when you met me.”

“You changed.”

“People don’t change, Solomon.”

It was no use trying to escape. Vincent was taller and stronger. He lifted monstrous piles of weights like they were feathers. Sometimes, late at night, Solomon would pause at the door to the exercise room and watch him at it. Vincent’s shoulders were sculpted like a Greek statue—or Etruscan. People always forgot the Etruscans, but their statuary rivaled Greek and Roman. There was a particularly interesting find in this month’s *Acta Archaeologica* that he’d been meaning to show Vincent...

“Your mind is wandering.” Vincent pressed the full weight of his body against Solomon, pinning him more firmly to the door.

“Just thinking about how I’m going to kill you.”

“Oh?”

Solomon swallowed. The position was familiar. They’d been here before. Vincent hadn’t been hard at the time.

“Shut up. They will hear you.”

The man sounded faintly winded. Solomon was triumphant. And bitter. He should have been faster. He should have been smarter. Getting caught by one of Dorna’s goons... the man had muscles like boulders—and probably a rock between his ears too. “Don’t want to share the glory with your buddies?”

“There is nothing glorious about death.” A hand came up over Solomon’s mouth. “Now be quiet or I will be forced to choke you into unconsciousness.”

Solomon kicked viciously at his captor’s shin. The world went fuzzy and dark.

He was hard now. Solomon tried to shift away from him. The door was in the way. He was caught between a cliché and a bad joke. “You switched sides,” he said. “For me.”

“For you, yes, that much is true.”

Vincent’s lips brushed the back of his neck. Solomon shivered.

“I am a loyal man, Solomon. And now I will have the reward for that loyalty.”

“I trusted you!”

Vincent chuckled. “Once upon a time, there was a scorpion who wished to cross a wide river.” He bent Solomon’s arm behind his back. “Next to the river, there lived a frog.”

Solomon found himself being marched across the room. Vincent’s hold was impossible to escape. How many martial arts did the man *know*? His knees bumped against the bed frame.

“I will carry you across the river, said the frog, but you must promise not to sting me.”

Solomon sprawled across the bed. He scrambled up—he tried to—but Vincent had a knee in his back. Solomon felt something around his wrists, soft but smooth. Cotton rope? His shoulders ached as his arms lifted. Tied to the headboard, perhaps? Solomon couldn’t see with Vincent straddling him. “Get off of me.”

“If you sting me, we will both drown,” Vincent said in his ear.

“They’re coming. If you want to live, do as I say, Dr. Zond.” The man raised the gun.

Solomon stepped away from the edge of the cliff and took a chance.

Vincent licked at his scar. The groove ran across the top of his trapezius, a puckered trail of white tissue long since healed. The nerves were dead there, making the surrounding tissue all the more sensitive. Solomon shivered.

The barrel of the gun was enormous. Solomon looked past it to the Dorna agent's eyes. They watched him intently. Solomon was good at reading people—most people. "I don't even know your name."

"Vincent."

"See you in hell, Vincent."

Vincent's mouth turned up in a small smile. The others were behind him. Approaching fast.

The pain burned across Solomon's shoulder. He collapsed, clutching it. His brain filled with white heat. Around him, indistinct shapes. Feet. More Dorna. Too late to run.

"Bring the prisoner," Vincent said in the distance. "I wish to interrogate him."

Vincent was obsessed with that scar. Every time he leaned over Solomon at a desk or clapped him on the shoulder after a mission successfully accomplished, his hand found its way unerringly to the same spot. His thumb was making little circles on it now.

"You are tense, Solomon. You should relax."

"I'm going to kill you."

"That's not how the story goes." Vincent slid down till he was pressed full length along Solomon's body again.

How did someone grow that enormous being raised in a monastery in Tibet? Did Dorna hand out growth hormone to its recruits?

Vincent shifted.

Solomon heard the unmistakable sound of a knife opening. His shirt tugged against his throat. He could feel the fabric rip as much as he could hear it; it jerked against him as each thread gave way.

Vincent yanked the ruined shirt off of him.

"Jesus Christ!" Gooseflesh shot up his spine.

"So the frog swam out into midstream with the scorpion on its back."

Hands fumbled at Solomon's belt.

Vincent had stuck a gun in his face the day they'd met. It wasn't the only time.

~ ~ ~

30 MILES FROM THE KAZAKH BORDER -
WEDNESDAY, AFTER DARK

"I'm sure you've got a hell of an explanation." Solomon's pulse raced. Adrenaline flooded his body. He held still.

Vincent waved the gun again. His grip on Solomon's shoulder was like a vise. "I'll take the sphere now," he said, spinning Solomon around to see the other occupant of the car.

"Dr. Zond, I really don't think you're meant to have that sphere."

Tollan. Dorna scum, and high-ranking Dorna scum at that. Solomon made no attempt to hide his anger. Vincent took the bag and slid into the driver's side while Tollan sneered.

"You never would have gotten it out of the country anyway," Tollan was saying. "With our contacts, the embassies, we can transport anything."

Solomon schooled his face into bitter resignation. *Damn it, Vincent.* This was a stupid, dangerous plan. Vincent was counting on Dorna trusting him again. There was nothing to stop them taking the sphere and dumping Vincent's body in a ditch somewhere, and Solomon would never even know. He would never have agreed to a plan this idiotic. Vincent charm any kid, dog, or cab driver on the planet into trusting him. But a secret society whose highest oaths he had broken? Dorna wasn't exactly known for its bonhomie, and Vincent had killed more than one of his old compatriots.

He drove away without looking back. Solomon returned to New York alone.

~ ~ ~

VERITAS BUILDING, NEW YORK - FRIDAY,
3:30pm

It took the bastard two days, the first of which Solomon spent researching Peruvian funerary customs. Their next destination was north of Lima. He had a mummy to find, transportation to arrange, corporate backers to negotiate with. The second day, he hid in his office and reviewed Vincent's security plans from their last dig. He was on the phone with a lackey at the Instituto Nacional de Cultura when Vincent sauntered in.

"I guess I won't be getting an invitation to the Dorna Christmas party." Vincent held out the sphere.

Solomon could have kissed him right there in the middle of the lab. “You know, you could have let me in on your plan sooner.”

“Too risky. I had to make it real for myself. I wanted them to pick up the smell of a traitor.”

Oh, is that how it is? Solomon took the sphere. He shot Vincent a glance. He looked calm, but underneath, Solomon could see him vibrating with nervous energy. Yes, that was *exactly* how it was.

Solomon wandered off to take a shower.

~ ~ ~

“Focus,” Vincent whispered in his ear.

“Fuck you,” Solomon said into his pillow. His skin prickled all over, electric where Vincent brushed against him. Getting fucked burned. It had been a long time.

Vincent bit down on his shoulder over the scar.

Solomon made an embarrassing noise as the rest of his brain trickled out his ears.

“The scorpion and the frog, *really?*”

Vincent’s mouth curled up at the corners. “Some classics are classic for a reason.”

Solomon snorted. “That’s not even how the fable goes: the scorpion makes it across and saves a man. It’s supposed to be about divine providence. The moral is a 20th Century corruption of the Aesop’s fable about a farmer nurturing a viper in his bosom.”

Vincent pinched his nipple.

Solomon smacked his hand. “You’d make a terrible scorpion. More like the frog and the mama bear.”

“Bears have been known to eat frogs.”

“Shut up and hibernate.”

~ ~ ~

CASTLE HENTZAU, SWITZERLAND

“Really, Vincent, your obsession with honesty is commendable but inadvisable.” De Molay paced in front of his desk. “How do you imagine he would react if he were to discover that you work for me?”

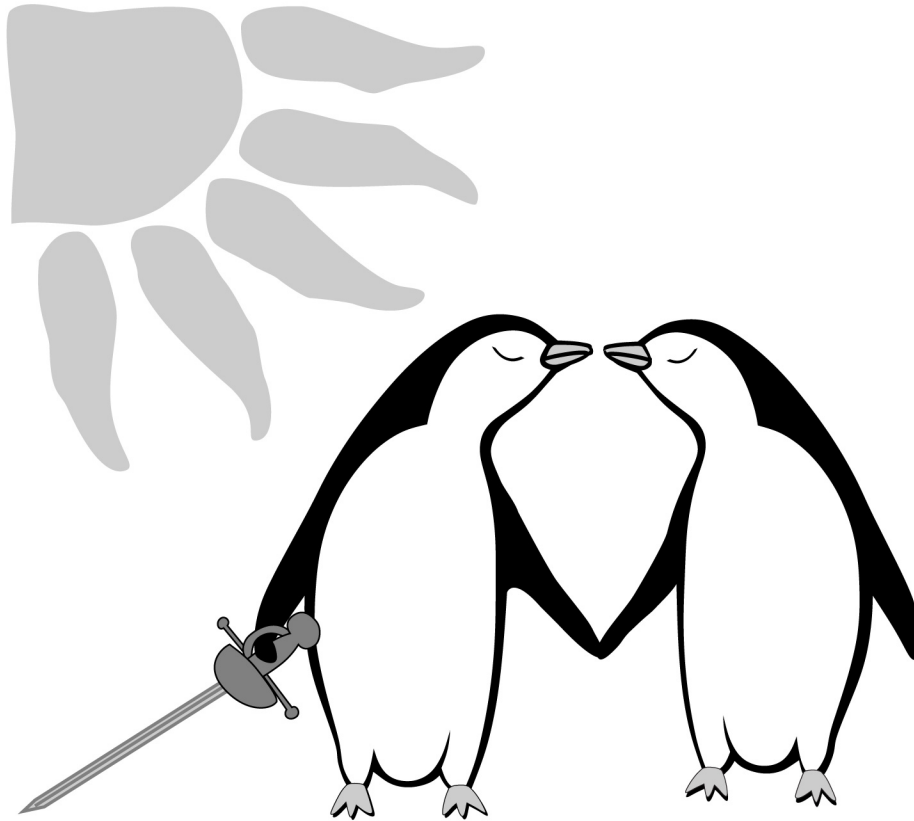
Vincent shifted. The leather of the armchair creaked. This was an old argument and not one he was going to win today. “We are reaching a point of no return, De Molay. The longer I keep Solomon in the dark, the more poorly that revelation will go.”

“Then you will simply have to make yourself indispensable to him. He *does* trust you, yes?”

“Yes. He still trusts me.”

Vincent left De Molay’s office. The orders were the same, the outcome of the argument the same as well. He resolved not to bring it up again. It was useless: He and Solomon had reached midstream a long time ago.





One Night in LA by Raine Wynd

Editor's Notes

Raine considered that bad weather pushes all kinds of flights off course, whether they carry an immortal or not. One immortal from the *Highlander* series that we don't see a lot of finds himself stuck in a hotel we *do* see a lot of. And then we see a lot of... well.

One Night in LA

by Raine Wynd

Tired from his travels, Richie slid into the high-backed bar stool with relief. He kept his leather jacket unzipped but didn't take it off. Staying overnight at a hotel near the Los Angeles airport hadn't been in his plans, but he'd gambled on a cheap ticket and lost the travel lottery. Between the post-Christmas rush and weather, he estimated he'd have been better off springing for a first-class, direct flight to Seacouver instead. Mac had wanted to pay for it, but Richie had his pride; he wanted to prove to himself that he didn't need the older immortal's money.

So much for that, Richie thought with a sigh.

Still, Richie was looking forward to being home again after spending most of the last two decades trying to figure out where he belonged and what he wanted to do with his life beyond 'not follow too closely in Mac's footsteps.' Now older and wiser, Richie thought he had a good handle on what made him happy and kept him grounded. Mac's offer to help him with his new gym felt like *déjà vu*, but Richie knew it was different for both of them this time. It had taken them a lot of time, long phone calls, a few interventions from mutual friends, a fair number of late-night drinks, and more than a few arguments to rebuild the friendship that had suffered from the fallout of a demon possessing Mac, making Mac almost kill Richie a third time.

Aware that Mac would be checking his flight's status, Richie pulled out his phone from inside his jacket pocket and texted Mac.

Flight delayed due to mechanical failure; stuck in LA for the night, he wrote. Don't wait up; I'll take a taxi over to your new place.

He was unsurprised when his phone rang. Mac didn't trust text messages, preferring voice or video. "You okay?" Mac asked when Richie answered.

"Tired," Richie said. "Remind me not to book tickets on cheapassflights.com again."

Mac laughed. "I wanted to buy your ticket," he reminded him.

"Yeah, well, next time maybe I'll take you up on it. If everything goes well, I'll see you about mid-morning, Mac."

"Forget about the taxi," Mac said. "Just send me your flight number and airline when you get on board."

"Will do, Mac," Richie promised, and disconnected the line as the bartender approached him.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked. "We have a few featured specials and the full dinner menu is available as well."

Richie frowned. The bartender looked a heck of a lot like someone he knew. He'd used the 'everyone had a double somewhere' line enough himself, but he honestly hadn't expected to run into one here. He scanned the selection of liquors on the back bar, then the card the bartender handed him, noting that the card also indicated what beers were on tap. His eyebrows rose as he saw one of his favorites and he looked up. "Really? You stock Men's Room Red?"

When the bartender nodded, he smiled and tilted his head just so, Richie became even more convinced he was looking at the perfect doppelgänger, if not the real thing. "I'll take the burger and fries and a pint of the Men's Room Red."

The bartender smiled. "Coming right up," he promised.

Richie nodded acknowledgement, then waited until the bartender had delivered his beer before turning to survey the room, aware he was seeing it with jaded eyes. Nothing could compare to Amanda's club in Paris, Sanctuary; he could've kept on working there forever, no questions asked, but after a decade of being one of the gastropub's bartenders, he wanted to be home, and home was

still Seacouver, no matter that he'd spent more time away from it than he'd lived there.

"Good to see that I'm not the only one here," a male voice greeted, and Richie turned to see the newcomer. He grinned at the man who'd been in the seat next to him on the flight from Paris. Richie had learned to appreciate other men; he very much appreciated this one.

"Good to see you again," Richie said. Broad chested and full-framed, the man had an oval face, high cheekbones, thick eyebrows, hazel eyes, a straight nose, full lips, and dimples when he smiled.

"Jason Valencia," the man finally introduced himself, extending his hand. "Since you actually seemed to enjoy talking about buildings and bridges for half the flight?"

Richie grinned wider. "Richie Ryan," he said, shaking hands before Jason sat down. He hadn't minded the discussion about engineering design, mostly because Jason's hair was wavy and dark brown, artfully streaked with shades of blond, the color echoing his natural bronze skin. His mustache and beard were neatly trimmed, outlining the angle of his jaw. He was still dressed in the same clothes he'd worn on the plane: a navy pinstriped dress shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots, but he'd ditched his carry-on. "You said you're an architect?"

"Naval architect, actually. Did civil first, got bored and decided I liked boats and things that float on the water better. What do you do?"

"Between jobs right now," Richie said honestly. "But I usually teach martial arts and tend bar."

The bartender chose then to approach. "Your food should be up shortly," he told Richie. "What can I get for you, sir?" he asked Jason.

"What's the Christmas ale I see you have on tap?"

"It's a winter warmer; this one's an English ale with ginger, honey, and cinnamon. Pretty easy drinking, goes good with the tacos."

"Sold," Jason said. "I'll take both the ale and the tacos." Jason watched the bartender walk away.

"More interested in him than in me?" Richie asked. He wouldn't be offended if the answer was yes. Surprised, maybe.

But Jason just smiled. "No, it's not that. He just... doesn't he look like Jeremy Renner?"

"Oh, the, uh — the guy with the arrows?"

Jason nodded. Richie relaxed. *That* was why he'd recognized the guy.

As he finished speaking, a server delivered Richie's dinner. "Did you want to take this over to a table?" Richie asked, seeing a two-top open just to his left.

"Yeah, let's," Jason agreed. "We're going over here," he told the bartender.

"Not a problem," the lookalike acknowledged.

Richie held no pretenses which way the evening was going to go. He was surprised by how much he wanted it — maybe because he'd been around faces and people he knew, for so many years in a row now, or maybe just because Jason looked nothing at all like Richie's last heartache. Richie had been on the verge of telling Charlie why he carried a sword; instead, their relationship had ended over Charlie's insecurity.

Richie wasn't sure if Mac knew he'd sworn off women and had been dating men; it hadn't ever come up in their discussions. Until he got his own place, Richie was going to be living with Mac, and it was just easier not to try to have a lover who'd undoubtedly be subject to Mac's scrutiny. Being with Jason tonight would have to be enough to tide Richie over for the near future, someone to help him past the heartbreak he felt every time he thought of Charlie.

"You look a million miles away," Jason noted, drawing Richie out of his thoughts. "I'm not boring you, am I?"

"No," Richie hastened to assure him. "Just...been a very long day."

Jason smiled at that. "Agreed. So where are you headed to from here?"

"Washington state," Richie hedged. "You?"

"Oh, where in Washington? I'm headed back to Spokane," Jason said. "I'm half tempted to just rent a car and drive up there from here, but I have no idea which passes are open and which are closed. It's still winter out there. Easier to fly, you know?"

Richie nodded. "Yeah, I'm headed back to Seacouver. I rode up from California once in December; that was a learning experience."

Jason laughed. "I can imagine. So what do you ride?"

"I have an old BMW dual sport a friend of mine gifted me with some years ago," Richie told him. "Do you ride?"

"Ah, no, I'm terrified of those things," Jason admitted with a laugh. "I got chased by a dog, fell

off my bicycle, and broke my arm when I was a kid. Never got back on two wheels again.”

“That’s too bad,” Richie told him. “But I can understand; it’s not for everyone.”

“I prefer a much different kind of riding these days,” Jason murmured, then ducked his head, as if he’d admitted something aloud that he’d just thought in his head.

Richie bit back the smile the sudden shyness produced. “So do I sometimes, with the right person,” he told Jason, looking at him directly.

Jason seemed to relax somewhat at that, and his flirting was sweet, as if he didn’t want to push Richie too hard. They turned their attention to the TV in the bar, which was tuned to ESPN. They talked sports while they ate, flirting all the while. After splitting the meal, Richie followed Jason to his room.

“You don’t have any second thoughts about this?” Jason asked hesitantly once the door was shut. “I mean, if you were just flirting to be friendly…” He let the sentence trail off awkwardly, as if this wasn’t his first experience with someone who might have misinterpreted his cues, or maybe that he thought Richie was that much younger and inexperienced.

Suspecting the latter, Richie turned to examine him, staring at the smooth skin and barely-there lines by his eyes and across his forehead. This guy couldn’t be more than thirty-two, but Richie had been twenty-three for years, now. He had the advantage. But he liked that this guy thought to ask questions like that. Richie wished suddenly that he had more than one night to show this man what he knew.

“Only if you don’t believe in safe sex and good lube,” Richie countered, stepping into Jason’s personal space. As an immortal, Richie wasn’t susceptible to disease, but he knew Jason didn’t know that, and it was just easier not to open that can of worms.

Jason cracked a smile at that. “Be an idiot if I didn’t,” he replied, and stepped back to rummage in the carry-on suitcase he’d propped on the collapsible luggage rack. He showed Richie the bottle of lube and box of condoms his search produced before setting them on the nightstand. Richie appreciated that the lube was a higher-quality one, indicating that Jason had definite preferences and probably shopped at a sex supplies shop. He hoped that meant that they’d get more than one round, but Richie was willing to take what he could get.

“Works for me,” Richie said, and moved in to kiss Jason.

Jason pulled back, dodging the kiss. “If you fuck me well enough, I’ll kiss you for it, how’s that sound?”

“Sounds like a challenge,” he murmured as he bit back his disappointment, but he knew the rules of this game. Kisses and foreplay were for committed relationships, not one night stands. For a night’s pleasure, Richie was willing to compromise. Love wasn’t always worth the extra effort, even without disclosing immortality. He preferred making connections to people, though, even one-night stands; it grounded him, made him believe that he was more than just a sword-wielding heir apparent to Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod. Tonight, Jason wanted him for who he appeared to be, not for the heads he’d taken, or for his sheer existence in the Game. Tonight, Richie wanted to feel like he was simply a guy needing to get laid, just as Jason was. Still, the weight of immortality felt heavy on his shoulders, and maybe it was a minor thing, but Richie wanted to be someone Jason *remembered*.

Richie started to undress as the other man did the same. Jason climbed onto the bed on hands and knees. Richie took a moment to admire the scene before him, letting himself be anchored in the now, in this smart, sweet, incredibly sexy man offering himself up so freely, and he gave in to the urge to stroke Jason’s spine. At the touch, Jason shivered in anticipation.

Richie smiled. *Not as indifferent as you pretend to be*, he thought, and decided to up the ante a little.

Richie prided himself on being a good lover, regardless of whether he was in love with his lover or not. As he stroked himself to readiness, Richie took the time to prep Jason well, paying attention to the way Jason reacted.

“Not a virgin,” Jason informed him when he had two fingers inserted.

“Maybe not, but I’m not going to hurt you if I can help it,” Richie told him. His cock was wider than average, which made preparation critical. He continued until Jason grew impatient and demanded he just fuck him already. Biting back a smug smile at that, Richie slid his cock into Jason’s ass. Jason met his thrusts halfway, and Richie smiled when Jason’s grunts turned into whimpers of pleasure. Reaching around Jason’s hip, Richie found Jason’s cock and began to stroke it in time to his thrusts.

“Oh, geez, Richie, yeah, like that,” Jason said breathlessly, and leaned up slightly so Richie

had more room to maneuver. From the way Jason was reacting, Richie was certain he was no longer just some anonymous hookup, but someone with a name. He leaned in, pressing his weight against Jason's back, feeling heat and sweat and pleasure build between them. Jason's continued effort to match his rhythm ratcheted the desire burning through Richie. Even as he continued his movements, Richie breathed carefully, afraid this would end too soon.

"You like?" Richie asked, as if it wasn't obvious, when he thought they were both getting close.

Jason nodded. "Yeah, Richie, gonna, ah, can't hold it," he panted breathlessly.

"Then come," Richie said, and felt Jason shudder, shaking with the force of his climax. Richie pumped him through it, until Jason batted his hand away.

Satisfied by Jason's reactions and turned on by the knowledge he'd given Jason such a thrill, Richie let go of his control and came hard.

For a long moment, Richie didn't dare move, not sure if he could hold himself upright. He took a deep breath, then, mindful of the condom, eased back and staggered into the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When he returned, he found Jason had flipped over to lie on his back.

"Hey," Richie said, easing down onto the bed. "You okay?"

Jason surged up and kissed him before flopping back onto the mattress. "Ask me again when I've found my brain."

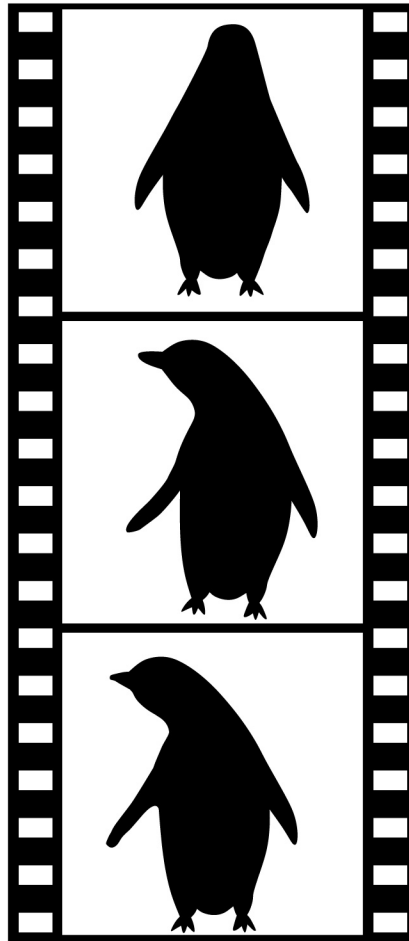
"You, uh, want me to stay?"

Jason closed his eyes, and Richie took that for his answer. He'd won Jason's challenge and gotten a kiss, but it looked like that was it for the night. Burying the sudden surge of disappointment, Richie dressed quickly. His hand was on the doorknob when Jason asked, "Is it too late to say yes? Because if that's how you fuck, I've been missing out."

Richie hid a smile and turned back around. It wasn't love, but even love had become ephemeral to him. Too much time thinking, Mac might say, but if he was going to live for generations, then one night or one decade might carry the same kind of importance. It didn't have to be love. If all they both had was a memory to take with them, Richie was determined that it would be a good one. Tonight, he could forget about the Game; tomorrow would be here soon enough.

Besides, Spokane wasn't *that* far from Seacouver ...





As the Years Multiply

by PFL

Editor's Notes

The Professionals! I'd forgotten how much I love them, but the stories reminded me. An Escapade theme might be hidden in this story, alongside an action plot and an arc of the lads' lives.

As the Years Multiply

by PFL

Damn Doyle, Damn him!

Bodie broke cover and started counting as he ran through the car park. Stupid, this was stupid. He ought never to have joined CI5. He ought to have left after that first week. Month. By now, anyway. Three months in to this bloody partnership and he was going to get killed in the wilds of Sussex because of Doyle's misplaced chivalry. *Five!* He lurched forward, gratified to hear the sound of gunfire as he pretended to stumble, then fell to the ground with enough momentum to end up partially obscured by a green Cortina. He lay still, heart racing. Would the villains check on him, or would they assume he was dead or injured? Marriott's proto-terrorist group was inexperienced—whoever had been shooting from the pub's first floor window had underestimated the trajectory of the bullet, given the slope of the car park. Amateurs! And Doyle had given himself up to them, for what?

Caring is all that separates us from the villains, isn't it?

Yeah, that was Doyle's bloody credo. As far as Bodie could see, caring was how you ended up a dead hero. Fuck. All this was supposed to be was an easy observation—follow Marriott—but now it was a fiasco. How long had it been since the gunfire? Marriott ought to have cleared out, but he was playing by a Hollywood script, wasn't he? He'd try to negotiate an escape, or make a stand and take out as many police as possible. Bloody anarchist. So, he and his men were probably rounding up everyone in the pub and putting them together in the front room. They'd be expecting the police since the woman and her child had got away, thanks to Doyle exchanging himself for them.

Bodie eased further behind the car, then made his way to the hedge that blocked the pub from the road. He ought to get out, get the lads, but it would take time to negotiate with the local coppers, and Doyle was inside that pub. Bodie turned and crossed a field to the back of the whitewashed building. Maybe he and Doyle could salvage the

situation before the police arrived and mucked it up. He'd understood Doyle's intention from the moment he'd given away his position to the twat who'd recognised him. The question was, had Doyle understood Bodie's move? Would he be ready?

Bodie found a back door to the pub that was locked but not bolted, and easily dealt with. The door opened into a long kitchen that showed all the signs of a hasty departure. An interior opening, like a large window, ahead to his right must connect the kitchen with the bar. Two doors stood at the end of the kitchen. He eased towards the doors, keeping low and moving as quietly as he could.

"We should get out of here!" The man's voice carried from the bar area, his tone worried.

"I told you already: it's too late for that."

"They aren't here yet, we could—"

"Shut up. Jason, get back up there and keep an eye out for the coppers. I don't want to be surprised. *Again*, fuck it all."

"Shat we give them a bit of a surprise?" A third voice joined the conversation.

"Yeah." Bodie tensed and held still as the sound of footsteps approached then passed by the door ahead of him. The same man—Marriott?—continued: "How far do you think we'd get Danny, eh? We'll have to bargain our way out now."

"With him?"

Marriott gave a short laugh. "Yes, your copper friend."

Bodie nodded. It must have been this 'Danny', then, who'd spotted Doyle, panicked and started the whole bloody thing.

"You'd be better off turning yourself in before this gets any worse." Bodie winced; Doyle airing an opinion, as usual.

He eased open the door to his left and saw it led to a store room and another door to the outside.

“Yeah, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Marriott said. “Make us disappear down some dark hole like all the others who oppose your fascist—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all before,” Doyle said.

Bodie slowly pulled back the right door, which was on a swing. There was an open dining area ahead of him, stairs to the left, and—fuck—to the right he saw the end of the bar and the front room where the hostages and villains were gathered. It was too exposed to get to the stairs. He could burst in but he had no clear idea of numbers or positions of hostages or villains. One—Jason—had apparently moved upstairs, but—

“We’re fascist police beating you down when all you want to do is blow up people going about their daily lives.”

“Shut up.”

“Isn’t that what you three are planning? Do you think I don’t know explosives when I see them?”

Christ—explosives. But despite the added complication, Bodie felt something like elation flow through him, and it added to the adrenaline rush. Doyle *knew* he was there. He’d probably positioned himself to watch the kitchen door. Doyle was bloody well feeding him information.

“Someone’s got to wake the sheep up,” Marriott said. His voice suddenly sharpened: “Stay where you are.”

“Just stretching me legs.” Doyle’s voice sounded a bit further away from Bodie’s position. “What are you afraid of? You’ve got the guns and the man upstairs as backup. You hold all the cards, don’t you? So, is that what he’s told you, Danny? You do realise he counts your mum amongst the sheep?”

“Shut up!” That was Danny.

“Mind you, he counts you amongst the sheep as well. He’s using you, isn’t he? Do you really think he’d pick you, of all—” Doyle’s words stopped with a sudden grunt and the sound of a blow.

Bodie moved, using the slight cover of the end of the bar to make it to the stairs while Marriott and Danny were occupied with Doyle. *The man upstairs as backup.* He was certain Doyle wanted him to take Jason out first. Bodie sped up the stairs to the first room. Jason sat with his back to the doorway, his attention split between the window and the box and wires on a table in front of him. Surprise explosives, eh? Bodie slipped up behind Jason, covered his mouth with one hand

and put pressure on his carotids with the other. When Jason went limp, Bodie quietly lowered him to the floor. He glanced at the explosive device. It wasn’t set, but if it had been— Fuck, it would have taken out the entire floor and more. He turned back to the stairs. Two more to go. What condition was Doyle in? In the distance, he heard sirens approaching.

“Jason! What do you see?” Marriott called from below.

Bodie went down the stairs fast, gun drawn.

“Ja—”

“Drop the gun,” Bodie ordered. He heard a crash in the front room, and a woman’s scream, but kept his eyes on Marriott. Marriott bent as if to set the gun on the floor, then swiftly straightened, took a step to the side, and brought his gun up. Bodie shot him in the shoulder, hurried over, to kick Marriott’s gun away, and trained his own on him. “Doyle!”

“It’s over, Danny,” Doyle said. A moment later he spoke again: “Clear, Bodie! All right, sunshine, hands on this rail. Sir, if you’ll just put these on him, please?” A few moments later, Doyle appeared around the corner of the bar. “Fancy meeting you here. I thought you’d done a runner.”

Bodie smiled. “Yeah, ran the wrong way, didn’t I?” He shifted his position enough to see two women and a man in the front room, along with Danny.

“Directionally challenged, that’s you.” Doyle was bleeding from a cut on his mouth, and he moved carefully as he knelt to check on Marriott.

“You all right?”

“Better than he is.” Doyle caught the cuffs Bodie tossed to him, secured Marriott’s ankles, then stood again. “Keep the pressure on, Marriott, we wouldn’t want you to bleed to death before Cowley sees you.”

“Cow— You’re bloody CI5?” Marriott winced as he jarred his shoulder.

“That’s right.” Doyle looked at Bodie. “Upstairs man?”

“Dead.” Bodie holstered his gun.

From outside they heard a voice speaking through a megaphone. “You in the pub! Come out with your hands up!”

Doyle sighed. “Hell.” He looked at Bodie. “You or me?”

“You know the answer to that. Copper.”

Doyle grimaced and turned towards the door.

“Ray. Gun.” Bodie held out his hand.

“Right.” Doyle handed his gun to Bodie, then turned to the people in the room. “Give us a minute to calm the police down and it’ll soon be over.” He pulled out his ID, opened the door and stood with his hands raised. “CI5! Everything’s under control!”

The coppers were incredulous at first but eventually cooperative. Bodie let Doyle handle negotiations while he kept an eye on their prisoners. The police took statements from the hostages, and a local ambulance crew patched up Marriott well enough to wait for a secured ambulance to take him to London. The landlord brought two pints of beer to Bodie while Doyle was on the phone with Cowley. Bodie leaned back on the bench seat and contemplated the vagaries of fate. Crewmember, bouncer, gunrunner, mercenary, soldier, and now...an agent, with a partner.

Doyle returned from his phone call and took a seat next to Bodie. “We got a ‘well done’ from Cowley.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, straight up. Mind you, it was after he harangued me for allowing Danny to recognise us in the first place. And for causing a rumpus.”

Bodie nodded. “A rumpus’. Anyway, it was *you* Danny recognised.”

“Which wouldn’t have happened if our intel had been better!”

Bodie eyed him. “Did you mention that to Cowley?”

Doyle looked at the ceiling. “Might have done.”

Bodie sighed. “Then get this down you.” He slid one of the pints towards Doyle.

“Oh, ta, mate.”

“It wasn’t from me. The landlord gave ’em to us.”

Doyle looked at him.

Bodie sighed. “Yes, I paid him. Drink up with a clear conscience, copper.” He didn’t mention that the landlord had refused the payment. On a whim, he raised his glass. “Here, wait. Let’s make a toast.”

“To Cowley’s ‘well done’?”

“No, we deserved that. To...my anniversary.”

“Anniversary?”

“Fifteen years ago I left home seeking fortune and adventure.”

“If you’ve got a fortune, you can buy the next round.”

“I kept seeking the adventure, didn’t I?”

“Oh, is that your excuse for moving from, what was it, mercenary to paras to the SAS to CI5?”

“Got bored, you see.” Bodie set his glass down.

Doyle rolled his eyes. “Well, you’re unique, I will grant you that.”

“They broke the mould with me.”

“To safeguard the world, yes. Understandable.”

Bodie grinned. “And that’s what we’re drinking to.” He raised his glass again.

“Safeguarding the world?” Doyle raised his glass as well.

“To the next chapter.” Bodie clicked his glass with Doyle’s. “I think I can safely say it’s not going to be boring. At the very least, you clearly need a keeper.”

“Pot kettle, mate. Anyway, you should be careful what you wish for.” Doyle drank some of the beer, then eyed Bodie. “Fifteen years, eh?” An odd look crossed his face, as if he was seeing something in the distance, but then he smiled at Bodie. “Planning on sticking with the partnership now then, are you?”

Bodie laughed a little, and felt again that strange sense of elation. Of course Doyle had known.

“Possibly. You?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

~ ~ ~

Bodie saw the figure sitting on the steps to his building and knew immediately who it had to be. Fuck. He had had tentative plans to meet up with Doyle after the assessment, but he’d forgotten in the aftermath of his own unexpected meeting with Cowley. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “Sorry mate,” he said, as he approached the steps. “Been here long?”

“Long enough.” Doyle’s tone revealed nothing of his state of mind.

“You look frozen. Come on up.” He led the way to his flat, silently cursing the last drink he’d had. He’d have to tread carefully with Doyle. He didn’t want to explain where he’d been, or why. He barely understood it himself. “Drink?” Bodie took off his jacket.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Doyle walked into the living room, and draped his own jacket on a chair. He accepted the generous portion of whisky Bodie had poured for him. “Not joining me, then?”

“Stopped at a pub earlier.”

“Started the celebration without me, eh?” Doyle sipped the whisky. “Not that you’ve asked me how the assessment went.”

Bodie shrugged but his stomach tightened with tension. “Of course you passed. I never doubted it.” He hadn’t. It was nearly three months to the day since Mayli Kuolo had shot Ray, but she hadn’t beaten him. No one could. Except for Ray himself.

“Yeah, of course I passed. Back on the squad, back on duty.” Doyle set the glass down, then faced Bodie. “But apparently without my partner.”

Damn. “It’s not quite like—”

“Then you tell me what it’s like, Bodie. Because Cowley was pretty damn clear about it.”

“You saw Cowley?”

“Are you leaving?”

“No.” He knew he’d taken too long to say the word. Dammit, he wasn’t prepared to be confronted by Doyle about this yet. He hadn’t had time to think through Ross’s report. Why the hell had Cowley told—? But, he knew why. They were Cowley’s best team, and Cowley would use whatever leverage he had to keep them. For a moment, black humour rose within him. He might have given more away to Ross than he’d thought, but he was certain neither she nor Cowley—nor, indeed, Doyle himself—understood just how much leverage Doyle could apply. If he knew...

Bleak despair chased the humour away.

“Had enough, then?” Doyle’s voice seemed as remote as his expression.

“Is it a wonder if I have had?” Bodie turned away. “All the sophisticated weaponry out there, what chance have we got?”

“You’re scared?”

Bodie sent a look Doyle’s way, but didn’t answer him. He moved towards the window, his thoughts jumbled.

“So, we just give up? Let the innocents who are even less prepared than we are just cope with it on their own. Right, why not?”

Bodie closed his eyes. Yeah, of course Doyle would think of them. Always bloody them—the sheep, the

ones they were protecting. The ones Doyle felt so guilty about he’d lay down his life—Angered flared within him on the thought, and he welcomed it. “Yeah, why not? Get out.” Bodie turned round. “I’m not going to be a fucking martyr with you, Doyle.”

“What the hell does that mean? What’s the matter with you? Cowley’s telling me Kate Ross has strongly recommended—”

“That he split the team.” Bodie kept his voice level as he overrode Doyle’s.

Doyle stilled, eyes wide. “You agree with her.”

Bodie tried to hold Doyle’s gaze, but he couldn’t. He felt trapped, caught between too many conflicting emotions.

“For fuck’s sake.” Doyle turned around, hand in his hair, then turned back. “Martyr, you said. Is that what she said? That I have a martyr complex or some rot like that? Bloody hell, Bodie, she said *you* had a death wish, but we both know—”

“*I didn’t* have a death wish! Yeah, I was willing to lay down my life to get justice for Keith but I didn’t seek death out. I didn’t embrace it like you in that bloody ambulance, I didn’t lie down and—”

“I didn’t either, you stupid—” Doyle cut off his words, stalked to Bodie until he was close. “I fought. You know what happened. *Strewth!* I told you who shot me—you said so yourself!”

“Yeah!” Bodie shoved Doyle so he could move away from him, then turned towards him again. “You signalled me. But it was to save *her*, not you.”

Doyle stared at him.

“I kept telling everyone—Cowley, the doctor, everyone—that you’d live. You had a strong will. You’d survive. Christ, I even told her—Mayli. I held her in my arms—could’ve killed her y’know. I thought about it. But you wouldn’t have wanted that. And, anyway, she was already dying. I told her you were all right, you’d make it. I told—” He couldn’t force any more words out. He turned away.

“Bodie...”

“You didn’t fight for yourself, Ray. You fought for her—the innocent caught up in bloody games. You wanted me to get to her before anyone else, didn’t you? Only, she wasn’t as innocent as you thought, was she?” He turned his head to look at Doyle. “No one forced her to pick up a gun and shoot you—she *chose* that path. No one forced Latowa or that bomber to get into the van. No one forced Mickey Hamilton to kill, or Paul Coogan to hit you, or—”

“Okay. I get it.”

“Do you?” Bodie walked back towards him. “You’re a ticking, self-destructive time bomb!” He stopped right in front of Doyle, the words flowing from him, finally released. Ross had been right and yet so wrong. No one knew the full truth. “Yeah, the sins of the world all rest on your shoulders and you’ll bloody crucify yourself and smile while you do it. Well, I don’t want to be collateral damage, mate.”

“You won’t be. Dammit, Bodie, do you think I’d—” Doyle broke off, his eyes searching Bodie’s face. “You don’t trust me.” He nearly whispered the words.

“To save my life? Yeah, I do. To save your own?” Bodie let the answer hang in the air. His chest hurt.

“You’ve made up your mind.”

Bodie turned away. He hadn’t. He didn’t know what he would do—leaving seemed just as impossible as staying.

“It wasn’t for her.” Doyle grabbed Bodie’s arm; Bodie shook him off. “Do you hear me?”

“Don’t bother—”

“It was *you*. You in my head, telling me—” Doyle breathed in and out quickly. “Oh, what the fuck, you’ll never— It’s too late. Too— Fuck this.” All of a sudden, he moved in, grabbed Bodie by the neck and kissed him.

Shocked, Bodie stood still, didn’t react, until realisation finally hit him: this was Doyle—*Doyle*—kissing him, and he wrapped his arms around him, held him as he’d wanted to for years. He kissed back, sought entrance into Doyle’s mouth with his tongue. Doyle opened for him, surrendered control, and that brought Bodie back to himself. Because when he had thought of this, in safe darkness, he’d always known Doyle would resist. There had been no hope. He wrenched his mouth away from Doyle’s, pushed him away. They stared at one another. “What the hell is this, Doyle?”

Doyle licked his bottom lip, but he met Bodie’s gaze. “I want you. I—”

Bodie propelled Doyle back against the wall, hands gripping Doyle’s shoulders. “Don’t fuck with me. You knew, didn’t you? That I’ve wanted you.”

Doyle was tense under Bodie’s hands, but he didn’t fight back. “Not for certain.” He took in a breath. “I didn’t think I— It wasn’t worth the risk. But in hospital I realised...” He lifted his head a little. “You’re what matters.”

Bodie shook his head. “No. You can’t. You can’t just change—”

“Death has a way of rearranging priorities.”

“It’s been three months.”

“Rearranged priorities aren’t necessarily easier to act on.” Doyle straightened, pushed back a little against Bodie, who eased his grip, but didn’t let him go. “I’m not fucking with you— Well, actually, I’d like to, but... What I mean is, this is real. I want you. Need you, I reckon. Long term, if we can make it work.”

Bodie stared at him, read the sincerity in his eyes and face. He had known Doyle in every mood, had been through firefights, and pain and death with him. He had trusted him with his life, and would again—collateral damage be damned. Trust was the very thing Dr. Ross thought he’d lost. But Ross was a fool. “Is this bribery, Doyle, to get me to stay?”

Doyle read him perfectly, as always. Bodie felt the muscles under his fingers relax. “Well, Cowley did say to use any means necessary to keep our team viable.”

“Well, then.” Bodie leaned in towards Doyle. “Let’s test our viability.” He kissed Doyle, felt the immediate response in him, and shut the door on the voice in his head warning him to be wary. By the time he manoeuvred Doyle towards the bedroom, his polo-neck was off, his trousers were undone, and he’d heeled off his shoes. Doyle still had his shirt on, but his jeans and pants had been left in the hallway. Bodie pulled Doyle’s shirt off and dropped it to the floor as they neared the bed. The light from the hallway allowed him to see the still-livid scars on Doyle’s chest. He traced them gently, feeling Doyle’s breaths. “What did they say at the assessment?”

Doyle laughed a little. “Now he asks.” He kissed Bodie, then tugged him towards the bed. “They want to monitor me when it gets strenuous, but they aren’t expecting any problems. I’m to tell them if I encounter any, of course.” Doyle settled onto the bed, on display. “Here, want to test my stress reaction?”

“And then some, yeah.” Bodie pushed off his trousers and followed Doyle onto the bed. He still couldn’t quite believe this was happening. He’d spent the evening at his local chasing fears in his head, debating the wisdom of leaving England. He put a hand on Doyle’s face. “Are you sure, Ray?”

“Idiot.” Doyle surged up, changed their positions, so Bodie found himself on his back with Doyle kissing him and stroking Bodie’s cock at the same time. Bodie moaned. Doyle broke the kiss. “Sudden changes can happen, mate. I know. Trust me.” Doyle didn’t say it as a question, but Bodie heard

it that way, anyway. He pulled Doyle close to him, and let touch give Doyle his answer.

It wasn't fireworks or ambitious when they came together. Bodie reckoned maybe they both needed the comfort of simple closeness. He kissed Doyle's scars, and traced veins and arteries with his tongue. He felt the surge of life as Doyle came in his mouth, and cried out his name. And in turn he gave himself up to Doyle's care and control and was brought safely home to his arms.

"Why didn't you knock some sense into me years ago?" Doyle murmured, his arms tight around Bodie.

Bodie forced one eyelid open to glare at Doyle, then closed it again. "I'll keep that in mind for the future, shall I?" He thought for a moment. "Mind you, all the posing and flirting makes a bit more sense now."

"Are you talking about me or you? I don't reckon I'll forget those skin tight beige trousers."

"Yeah, learned my lesson there. I kept to black after that." Bodie nuzzled Doyle's chest. "You talked about risk. If Cowley finds out—if anyone finds out..."

"I know." Doyle sat up, dislodging Bodie, but dropping a kiss on his mouth as well. "But it's worth it. Reordered priorities, remember?"

"I'm not likely to forget. Oi, where are you going?" he asked as Doyle climbed out of the bed.

"Loo." Doyle sent Bodie a look over his shoulder. "Don't go to sleep on me."

"Then you'd better 'urry up hadn't you?" He made himself comfortable in the bed, but Ray had put a notion in his brain that went straight to his kidneys. Cursing, he climbed out of the bed and reached the loo just as Doyle exited it. Doyle grinned at him, so Bodie mock-punched him on the shoulder. When Bodie got back from the loo, he found the room lit by the soft glow of the beside lamp, and Doyle in bed with a half-filled glass in his hand. "Oh, make yourself at home, why don't you? What is that—did you get into my champagne?"

"Of course." Doyle handed Bodie a glass as soon as he settled next to Doyle in the bed, his back against the headboard. "Only the best for you, sunshine."

"Yeah, that's why I bought it." He took a sip of the sparkling liquid. "You know, I could have done with some food. I never did have dinner."

"And whose fault was that? I was waiting for you, all on my own. Finally had to track you down here. Only, you weren't here, you bastard."

Bodie looked at Doyle narrowly. "You had dinner, didn't you, you little toe-rag."

Doyle grinned. "Of course I did. I waited an hour, had some food, *then* went searching for you."

"I thought I was the pragmatist in this pairing."

"You were too busy trying to leave me."

"Didn't get far, did I?" He dropped a kiss on Doyle's shoulder, hiding his face for a moment as residual tension tightened his gut.

"Trying to avoid being collateral damage." Doyle's voice was gentle.

"Trying to avoid being a witness—" And, dammit, his voice cracked on the word. "The pattern's pretty clear, Ray."

"It's broken." Doyle said it flatly.

Bodie didn't say anything. He had lived with the pattern for years. Would it hurt more or less now they were lovers? He supposed it didn't matter. He'd made his choice.

Doyle sighed, fiddling with his glass of champagne. "You remember I told you about cutting up that kid when I was just a kid myself?"

Bodie frowned. "Yeah. You didn't get caught, you said. It sounded like you needed to do it to survive."

Doyle let out a short laugh but there was no amusement on his face. "I told myself that. Well, and it *was* rough, but—" He shook his head as he gazed at the wall.

"You felt guilty."

"How'd you guess?"

It went back that far? Bodie contemplated the champagne in his glass.

"I didn't feel it at first. Or, at least, I didn't recognise it, if I did. But I started getting into a lot more trouble—hurt more people. Never got caught. Until finally I tangled with the wrong crowd. I woke up in hospital with a broken cheekbone." Doyle shook his head. "I don't remember much about what happened, but I do remember that at the time all I could see was that kid I'd knifed, lying in his own blood."

"You'd killed him?"

“No I knifed him but he got help quickly enough. He didn’t bleed out—not like I was seeing it in hospital. I *knew* that, but the images haunted me. Probably because it could have easily ended that way.”

“Guilt.”

Doyle shrugged. “Responsibility. They’re intertwined, aren’t they?”

“Not really.”

“Well, they are for me. In hospital, it was like waking up from sleep, you know? I...changed.”

“Your priorities changed.” Bodie looked at Doyle. “Was that when you decided to—what did you call it? ‘Get some discipline.’ You joined the police?”

“Not right away, but yeah it all stemmed from that.” Doyle drew in a breath. “Call it guilt, responsibility—the point is, I knew I had to care about my actions—others—or...what’s the point? It’s when I stop caring that bad things happen.”

“Superstition, Ray.”

“No. Cause for carelessness.”

Bodie thought back over the years. “So, when you wouldn’t help yourself after Coogan...and that bike accident after Mickey Hamilton died?”

Doyle nodded. “That time I got knifed in the drugs squad.”

“And...Mayli.” Bodie kept his voice neutral, hiding his disquiet.

“Forgetting to set the locks, not taking action as soon as I saw her. Those two boys had died in the van, and I hadn’t...cared enough.” Doyle shook his head.

“For Christ’s sake, Ray. They chose—”

“Their own actions. I know.” Doyle turned to more fully face Bodie. “I *know*. And I believe it. *Really* believe it. Now. And Mayli, too. That’s what changed this time, when I woke in hospital. I still care—I *have* to care—but...it’s a balance, isn’t it? I think I’ve finally learned that.”

“You’re saying you’re not responsible for the invention of gunpowder.”

“You what?”

Bodie smiled a little. “Believe me, you would have got round to thinking it.”

“Yeah, well, not any more. It’s a job, and I’m good at it. But...it’s not going to take everything.” Doyle raised his glass. “Worth celebrating, eh?”

Bodie was dubious that Doyle had cured his propensity for guilt so easily, but maybe this balance notion of his was enough to keep self-destruction under control. And he would be there to ensure Doyle kept it under control. Doyle had given him that power of his own free will, it seemed. “Yes, worth celebrating with my last bottle of champagne.”

Doyle tilted his head. “Anyway, it’s our anniversary, remember.”

“Our...?” Bodie looked at Doyle, disconcerted. Doyle *couldn’t* be that fatuous... He noticed the wicked glint in Doyle’s eye. “You bastard. What are you on about, then?”

“Wasn’t it about twenty years ago now that you set off to find your fortune and adventure? Look how well that turned out!”

“Twenty—?” Bodie did a quick calculation in his head. “Yeah, okay, but—”

“Well, it was also twenty years ago that I got this.” Doyle brushed his fingers along the implant in his cheek.

“Really? You mean, while I went off adventuring, you were getting beaten up?”

“Yeah, hardly seems fair, does it?”

“Don’t worry, petal, I’ll protect you now.” Bodie saluted Doyle with his glass and drank some of the champagne.

Doyle eyed him, but drank some of his own champagne before he spoke again. “I shall keep that in mind next week.”

“Next week?”

“Well, since you’ve decided you’re staying—and you *are*—we’re off to team assessment next week. At least, that’s what Cowley said.”

“Bugger. Well, that won’t be so bad. Jack’s a—” He broke off as Doyle shook his head.

“Not Jack.”

“Not?” Bodie’s heart sank.

Doyle nodded. “Macklin. It’s all your fault for scaring Cowley.”

Bodie looked at him, appalled. The worst of it was, he couldn’t argue with him.

“You’re going to have to make it up to me.” Doyle set his champagne glass down on the bedside table.

“How am I going to do that?” Bodie watched with interest as Doyle took his glass and placed it beside the other one.

“Oh, I have every faith in your inventiveness.” Doyle’s mouth stopped any verbal reply Bodie might have made.

~ ~ ~

Bodie juggled bags and the unfamiliar keys as he stood outside the door to the flat. Just as he got the right key into the lock, Doyle opened the door. “Oh, perfect timing,” Bodie said, with some sarcasm.

“Couldn’t imagine who was making all that racket.” Doyle took one of the bags and turned back into the flat.

Bodie followed him into the living room, carrying the rest. “You’ve been busy, then.” He looked round the sparsely furnished living room. Doyle had moved the sofa away from the window, giving anyone who sat on it a view to the outside. A somewhat battered coffee table was in front of it with two plates and cutlery already laid out. Doyle had set up the TV and stereo—the one on Bodie’s old trunk and the other on bookshelves. Doyle’s grandfather’s upholstered chair had been placed at a right angle to the sofa and would do if they had any guests. Well, one guest.

“Yeah, put it all on the table there and I’ll bring beers.” Doyle’s voice carried over his shoulder as he walked towards the kitchen.

“How is the kitchen?”

“Don’t ask, unless you want to be put to work.”

“I have no curiosity.” Bodie set about opening bags and cartons, laying the food out on the coffee table.

Doyle came back into the room, carrying two beer bottles. “The bed’s put together, though, you’ll be glad to hear.”

“I am. Wish I could say I planned to do more than sleep, though.”

“Food will revive you. It had better. What did you get?”

“Chicken tikka masala, lamb bhuna, tarka dal, seafood curry, onion bhajis, poppadoms, pilau rice, sag aloo—for you—and naan for me. Will that do?”

“Whose army are you expecting, then?” Doyle settled onto the sofa and picked up one of the plates.

“I haven’t worked so hard since I was in the army. Moving is more work than I remembered!” Bodie

also sat on the sofa, then unwrapped the naan and transferred one of the pieces to his plate.

“Always had Accommodations take care of it before. That naan looks good. You don’t mind if I have it, right?” Doyle snatched the remaining piece of naan.

Bodie reached into one of the bags and pulled out another serving of naan. Doyle grinned at him. Bodie piled his plate high with food, leaned back and looked around at the living room. “Nice.”

“It’ll do for a start.” Doyle took a bite of food. “At least we know there’s a good Indian nearby.”

“And we already know our local is decent.” They weren’t as centrally located as when they had been with CI5, but the first floor flat was big enough for both of them, secure, and within their budget.

Doyle nodded and reached for his beer bottle.

“Here, wait.” Bodie picked up his own bottle. “First toast. Um... Well, it took twenty-five years after that knife fight, but you were finally caught in a wrong-doing.” Bodie reflected for a moment. “Actually, it was more of a right-doing, if you ask me.”

“I’m not,” Doyle said. “Asking you. But I’ll drink to that. Here’s to...getting my priorities straight once and for all.” He clicked his bottle with Bodie’s.

“And a less fraught future.” Bodie drank from the bottle.

“Can’t guarantee that, but the odds are in our favour. No more hiding, at least.”

Bodie set his bottle down. “And Cowley did all right by us—let us retire rather than kicking us out.” He said it lightly, but he meant it. It was about time Doyle got over his resentment.

“Hmm. Well, it was the decent thing for him to do, considering it was all his fault.”

Bodie raised his eyebrows. “How’s that?” He pushed seafood curry onto a bit of naan.

Doyle gestured with his fork. “He told me to find a way to keep you in CI5.”

“Yeah, mate, five years ago.”

“Well, there you go. He should be thanking me rather than tossing me out on me ear.”

Bodie eyed him. “Tossing us out with pensions and contacts for setting up our own private security business.”

Doyle waved a hand in the air. "Yeah, all right, you've made your point. Hey, you reckon we can call him 'George' now?"

"I'll let you try it first."

"Coward." Doyle ate more food, then set down his knife and fork. "Here, then, what about you?"

Bodie frowned. "What about me what?"

"Twenty-five years, and...are you done with adventuring? Finally?"

"Living with you? That's adventure enough for anyone." After a moment, he sighed. "I don't reckon I will ever see that fortune, though."

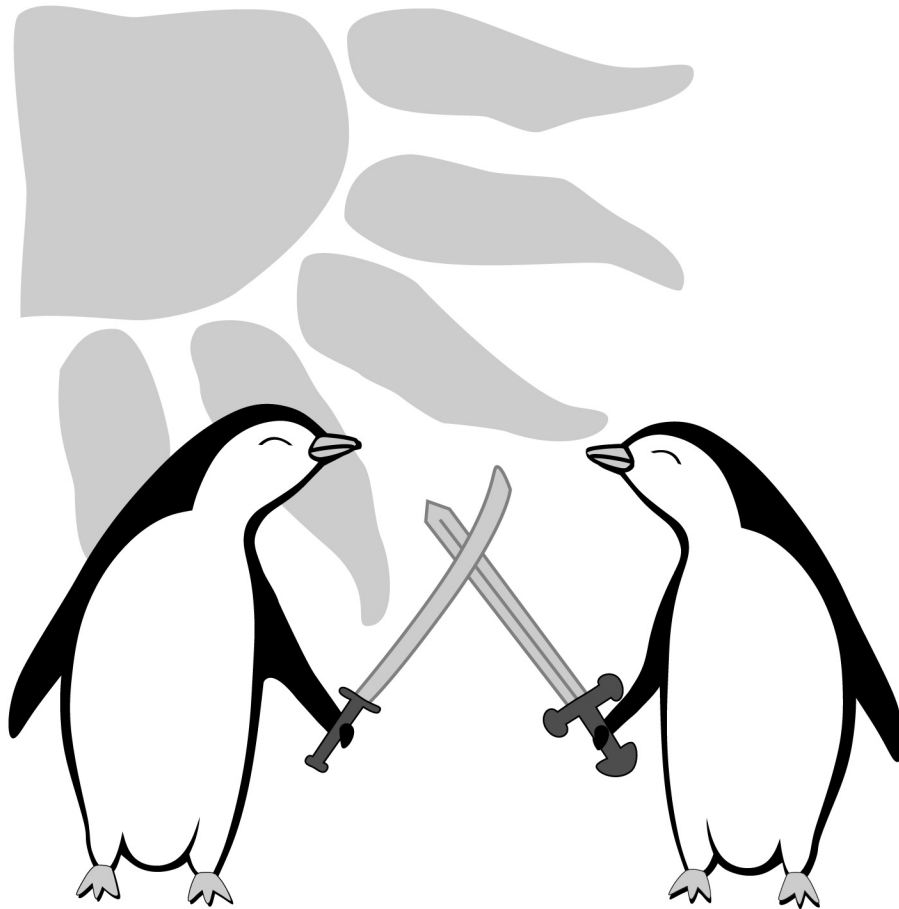
"Oh, I dunno. Depends on how you define 'fortune'." Doyle smiled at him.

Bodie looked away for a moment, too used to hiding his feelings, but then he looked back at Doyle. "Let's do this properly." He set his plate down on the table and picked up the beer bottle again. "Here's to five years ago, when you came to your senses."

Doyle rolled his eyes, but the affection he felt was clear on his face. "Here's to ten years ago, when you came to *your* senses and decided to stay."

"How about this, then. After twenty-five years, we're both free, healthy, and finally home." Bodie clicked his beer bottle with Doyle's.





Comet
by Devo

Editor's Notes

Our one and only poem. Thanks to devo for giving us something that was a big part of many, many zines back in the day. And a *Highlander* poem, no less!

Comet

by Devo

Author's Notes

with thanks to Gryphonrhi for prompts

It begins mid-thrust.
They've been at it all afternoon,
golden light pouring in through the blinds,
adding even more warmth
to Duncan's skin.

Blessedly, they'd forgone
the explanations, the travelogues,
the funerary rites for absent friends.
Duncan had taken a long look, nodded,
and pulled out an old bottle, well-laden with dust.

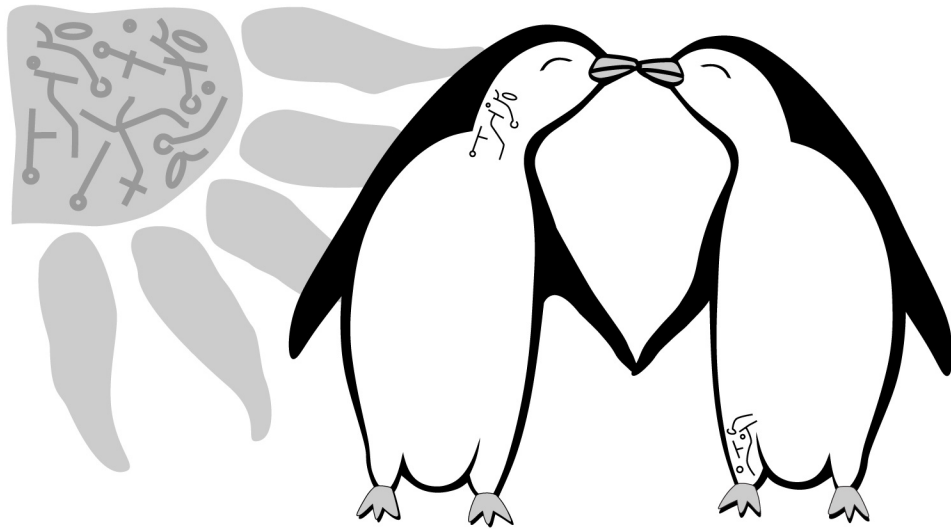
With suitable time for appreciation --
of time passed, of Duncan's new digs,
of the single malt --
they'd danced their way around and around,
a kata of reunion and assessment,
a poke here, a sidelong brush of skin,
on the floor, in the bed,
pushing and stroking and claiming,
first with hands, then teeth,
then the full weight of body and song,
until now, when Methos feels it:
The tension in his eyes, letting go,
relaxing that slight fraction of his guard.

His breath, releasing, like dust from a comet
as it makes its way on it's long, slow journey
to orbit, once again, around its star.
Duncan's eyes are closed;
from his throat, untranslatable sounds.

They move together, now, for a day,
an epoch, a moment, a year.
Ice and fire, comet and sun.
He'd forgotten this burning.
Kept his distance, before,
as he certainly will again.

But for now, there is this, the haven of their joining.
He kisses Duncan's brow, completes the thrust,
and yells cheerful bloody murder to the night.





An Offer in the Form

by Charlotte C. Hill

Editor's Notes

Almost Human was a cop show set in the future. Its deep thought involved the nature of humanity, the status of intelligent beings as property, and the dangers of technology outstripping the ability of law enforcement to keep up. Michael Ealy and Karl Urban, the stars of the android/human detective partnership, only increased the show's appeal.

An Offer in the Form

by Charlotte C. Hill

Author's Notes

In Fox's world of arbitrary episode order, I might have taken liberties. You Are Here made much more sense earlier in the series timeline than Fox aired it. But I had also anchored Are You Receiving and Skin pretty early in the show as well. This story makes clear the order in which I used early episodes; I hope you'll indulge me at least as much as you indulged FOX.

He feels eyes on him when he walks through the station, sees the hostile looks, and understands. He's the guy who let someone get too close, infiltrate him. He's the guy who got everyone, every single cop he led into that raid two years ago, killed. He'd hate John Kennex too, if he were on the outside looking in.

Still, he resists the temptation to go back and force his black-market recollectionist to zap his brain some more only because Dorian said he'd report it if John does. Apparently John can't afford to wind up "dead or with fewer brain cells that, man, you really can't afford to lose." Dorian also promises to tell him when John might be able to safely endure the procedure.

Safely endure the procedure. John has the impression that Dorian's opinion isn't gonna be as stringent as the licensed doctors who told John "no" before a black-market doctor started sounding like a good idea. John has no idea about the details of Dorian's core hardware technology, but the DRN can't be as human as he acts, or he would know why seeing a recollectionist now is worth the risk.

As they drive the streets, John looks sidelong at Dorian, who for once isn't making idle conversation. John's reasoning isn't completely fair; Sandra wouldn't say it's worth the risk, either, and she's human even if she is his captain. She should understand why he needs to find Anna.

Richard Paul would say it's worth the risk, since it's only John's brain they're talking about... so a DRN is more human than Richard? John laughs under his breath.

"Something funny, John?"

"Yeah," John says. He doesn't elaborate. No way is he going to suggest that Dorian is better at anything than any human being is. He suspects the DRN already thinks that's true, but he does a pretty good job hiding his opinion. Seconds tick by until a minute or more passes.

"And you're not going to share."

"No."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here," Dorian says, "and guess that I'm not the only person who knows you're a huge pain in the ass."

"You're not a person."

"Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning," Dorian says, and settles deeper into the passenger seat. He doesn't sound angry. He hasn't sounded angry since their confrontation in the precinct office, and John still doesn't know if that was a bug or a robot "emotion" or a programming strategy designed to convince him of something.

John doesn't even grunt. For the most part, Dorian has acted like a model partner, but "acted like" are the key words. John has seen plenty of synthetics with the processing capacity to respond halfway realistically to human behavior: household droids, personal service bots. Old-age companions. Other androids in the DR series.

He's not falling for the mimicry. But riding with a DRN means he doesn't have to deal with an MX, so he'll take it.

~ ~ ~

At home, John pulls out a flimsy and drags his finger across the top, opaquing the sheet. He uses his finger to write, the fast, almost unique-to-him graffiti that computers have learned from him over the years. He hates voice recorders and refuses to commit this to video.

Loyalty. It seems like that's something Dorian gets, or fakes pretty goddamned well. It's the best thing about the DRN. This model of android isn't compelled to file a report whenever a rule gets broken, and its programming seems adapted to the idea of greater rights and lesser wrongs. That sure as hell isn't something an MX would be able to process.

He told me he has free will. I don't believe that androids can have free will.

I don't even know if people have free will. I've got a seventeen-month hole in my memory, a synthetic leg that doesn't like me, and a DRN android for a partner. I've got a couple of months of rehab and the kind of pain I can't forget. I wouldn't have chosen any of those things. But if I was back in that alley two years ago with Pelham, and knew how it would go down, I'd have done the same thing. You don't just walk away and leave your partner to die.

Is that free will? Doesn't feel like it.

I keep waiting to run into the DRN machine code. I don't mean the slip-ups or the ignorance that comes because he hasn't lived a real life, like telling me I'm "malfunctioning," or the calculations it can make because of the processing power of the chips in its net. I'm waiting for the artificial. The—the synthetic.

Lock. Kennex, John. Birthdate January 14, 2007

~ ~ ~

They've only served six shifts together, and it's already too easy to forget.

John keeps attending his mandatory anger management classes, and he did his mandatory follow-up with Dr. Tilden, the department's shrink. He keeps running his investigation on the side. It's not like he's sleeping, much.

Maybe he's projecting or something, because Dorian seems to hate MXs. And the MXs aren't too keen on Dorian, either. John can't help but love that.

Still, he shouldn't have shot Richard's MX today. He knew as soon as he did it, before the 'bot hit the concrete or Richard's curses stopped echoing off the subway station walls. He'd sure as hell known before they were standing in the captain's office and Sandra started yelling.

But mostly, he knows when Richard threatens Dorian in Captain Maldonado's office, and John almost takes the guy's head off right there in front of her. Still, he has to make his point. "You can dress these machines to look like cops. You can program them to drive a car and shoot a gun like a cop," he says to the captain. "But they're not cops. They're bullet catchers."

Sandra dismisses Richard, lets John charm his way out of hot water, and sends him out to interview the victim's girlfriend.

He collects his android with a nod and things seem as normal as his life gets these days, until they're in the squad car. Then Dorian starts smirking at him from the passenger seat and won't stop. Won't blink.

"What." John tries to say it like it's not a question.

"You like me."

"Sorry?"

"You like me," Dorian repeats. He looks way too happy for a pile of silicon and carbon fiber.

"No I don't."

"Yes, you do." Dorian's tone brooks no argument. He sounds certain, like he'd swear to it in a court of law—if the opinion of a synthetic were legal testimony.

"No."

"You definitely do."

"How do you come by that conclusion?"

"The MX. You shot it because it insulted me. You like me."

"No, I shot the MX because it wouldn't shut up." John would swear to *that* in a court of law.

“Nope. You shot it because you like me.”

“Keep talking, I’ll prove my point.”

“It’s okay, John,” Dorian says, and smiles. “I like you, too.”

There’s no way to win. Dorian just says things like that. John wishes that whoever designed DRNs had put in a little less chat and a little more circumspection. He doesn’t *mind* the android, and maybe Dorian’s even growing on him a little. But he’s not gonna admit he likes him. Besides, Dorian doesn’t act like he needs John to agree, anyway.

He wonders if Dorian would like the term “bullet catcher” more or less than “synthetic”. It’s a more accurate description of an MX’s function, John supposes, but not necessarily of Dorian’s. He opens his mouth to try it out when Rudy calls from the lab with information on the bullet that killed their vic, Anton Cross. It’s less a bullet and more a miniature guided missile. Great.

They get to the girlfriend, Kira Larsen, and Dorian stumbles over the vic’s involvement in the black-market tech that was the bullet’s guidance system. John resists the urge to say, “Good work,” or something he might have said to a human junior partner. Dorian isn’t a partner. Dorian’s a way to avoid MXs. On the drive back to the station, John gets a brief history of Cross’s tracking technology, most of which he doesn’t understand, but if he repeats bits in a meeting he’ll probably sound like a genius. Maybe part of a DRN’s programming is to make its human look good.

Back at the station, Valerie looks for a money trail and Richard pokes at Dorian a little. Richard isn’t nasty, but John figures it’s his own fault for shooting Richard’s MX, so he asks Dorian for direct support, after. He even asks nicely. “Anton’s girlfriend said he’d been meeting a headhunter from a company called Kinsey,” he says, after he catches Dorian’s eye. “All we have is a first name. Can you check it out?”

Cold blue lights race down synapses. John’s going to ask Rudy why that circuitry is placed in the dermal layer. Seems like it’s vulnerable, there. Dorian says, “There are no Natalies currently employed by Kinsey.”

John thinks. “Maybe Kira got the name wrong.”

He wants to let Dorian do the detecting, but it’s Valerie who says, “Or maybe she’s lying.”

John didn’t get that feeling off Larsen. He thinks she’s just a shell-shocked girlfriend whose boyfriend got dead. But John slept with the enemy for almost a year, and didn’t even know. He’ll take a second opinion.

He’ll even wait to let Dorian say, “Let’s go ask her.”

He turns to go when he sees Sandra Maldonado in a precinct interrogation cube with that InSyndicate dirtbag, Reinhart. Why did she let him out of his cell at the Cubes? “Hang on,” he says to Dorian, and takes off after her.

He can’t believe she’s willing to offer Reinhart a deal, not after the asshole led an assault on this very precinct. He can’t believe she’d have offered him a deal before that assault, when all she knew was that he’d been at the site of the InSyndicate raid that killed most of John’s strike team two years ago, including Martin Pelham, John’s real, human partner.

He doesn’t believe whatever information Reinhart has is worth letting him walk. He can’t believe it, or he’ll be back at the recollectionist tonight, forcing the guy to scramble his brain until he either remembers everything, or he can’t remember his own name. But it eats at him, like a rat he can hear behind the decayed walls of his lost memory, scurrying, scratching, causing damage he can’t see and can’t fix.

Dorian waits in the bullpen where John told him to wait, watches him approach. “John?” Dorian asks as John walks by and waves him along. “You okay?”

Dorian must have run a bioscan on him. Police androids have the tech to collect data available to any public filtration device, and the legal authority to look deeper, in all kinds of circumstances. So Dorian must have a full biological report, including any hormone associated with rage that John happens to excrete through his lungs, mouth, or skin.

He stops and turns on Dorian. He’s got to figure this out. “Why?”

Dorian glances around, steps a little closer, and lowers his voice. “I saw... who distracted you. I know it’s hard, man.”

How? How could you know anything like that? John doesn’t ask. He’s got some homework to do, but later. He shakes his head instead. “Let’s get moving. Locate Kira Larsen for me.”

Dorian’s eyes focus on the middle distance as they walk, but he doesn’t miss a step. “She is on foot, a few blocks away from her place of work at Trope Consulting. She usually buys lunch from a vendor in the open market on Sixteenth and Haley.”

John nods, and drives.

Twenty minutes later, they stand in the sun of the open market, re-interviewing her. John is surer that she's telling the truth, that she's ignorant of the wet work her boyfriend got himself into, but they get a better description of Anton Cross's headhunter before another guided bullet hits too close to home. John stumbles back a few paces, shoved away by his DRN. So was Kira Larsen. Dorian's down.

John reaches out and touches Dorian's shoulder, forgetting again that it's an android, but the shocked frown that looks like, and can't be, pain reminds him, and he lets go. "You okay?" he asks.

Tracer lights flash under his skin, and John guesses it's diagnostics being run.

Dorian says something in some Asian language. Then he glances at disgusting purple goo on his fingers and smiles up at John, full voltage, like he's posing for a public relations poster.

Who puts an android's language translation system in its abdominal cavity? *Behind the chest plate*, John thinks, before he can say something stupid. Protected under the armor. He'd thought the size of the high-caliber bullet was mostly to house the tracking gear, but the projectile was heavy enough to spin two or three hundred pounds of android to the ground *and* poke a hole through police-grade tactical housing.

"I'll call it in," he says. "Who was the target? Her, or me?"

Dorian says what might be, "Chong-a-ri go nyeo hae-do—" enough for John to identify Korean—before John holds his hand out to shut him up.

"Stop," John orders. "Just—point. Me?" He hooks his thumb at his chest. "Or her?" He points toward Kira Larsen, who ran a good twenty feet away. She's smart.

Dorian frowns like John's the one speaking gibberish, then points to Larsen.

"Great." He holds out a hand to lever Dorian up, and wishes he hadn't when the goo gets onto his palm. It's sticky. And it's... warm. He pushes Dorian toward her, covertly wiping his hand on the back of the android's police jacket. With that bullet hole, it'll get recycled and replaced, anyway. "Stick close to her and keep an eye out for incoming until I can get reinforcements here. If they tried once, they can try again. Do *not* talk to her. Do not say anything. Got it?"

Still frowning, Dorian nods and walks over, stops three feet away and turns his back to her. John calls it in while he watches Dorian on sentry, watches Dorian's eyes track from traffic scanners

to ATMs and automatic food servers, from secured doors to payment scanners to public transit access gates. John's used to a world where everybody knows where he is unless he makes a hell of an effort to hide. The fact that unless they stop these people, all of those cameras and scanners are one big guidance system that can paint a target on his back makes his skin itch more than usual.

Backup arrives, Larsen is placed in a blacked-out, secure vehicle, and a guy from Android Tech scans Dorian. Dorian is cleared, and he looks fine. John asks anyway. "How are your functions? You okay to continue?"

He hopes whatever Dorian says means, "Yeah man, my functions are great, I'm good to go," because he's got to get Kira Larsen to accept protective custody and figure out what she knows that's so important, these people are willing to kill her for it. If Dorian can't function under pressure, he really can't do this job.

She accepts protection until they get her to a secure, underground facility. Then all of a sudden she's ready to have Anton Cross scrubbed out of her memory. The plan is naïve, at best. And it might piss John off a little that she's willing, on impulse, to have memories removed when all he wants is to recover memories he can't get at.

He concentrates on witness/victim interaction and tries to convince her. Scrubbing won't make a difference. These people have already marked her for death. She doesn't look convinced, but there's nothing else he can do right now.

Eight hours later, after she's escaped to implement her stupid plan and nearly got them both killed, John's ears are ringing from machine-gun fire. His pulse is racing and he's sweating. It's hard not to pant under the demands adrenaline and fear forced onto him, fight-or-flight, but now there's nobody to fight and no reason to run. The hallway feels flooded with other cops, and since he fired his weapon and killed someone, their MXs are free to analyze his blood chemistry to file with their reports.

He looks over and decides Dorian can definitely do this job. Dorian might have feelings, but he looks calm right now. Inhumanly calm. Dorian doesn't sweat and didn't hesitate when John asked him to draw the shooters' fire. Dorian just makes decisions, like the one to step in front of a machine gun so John could duck out and get a kill shot. John's not as sure about Dorian's decision to fire strategically on the blonde rather than put her down. In John's opinion, sometimes it's better just to exterminate vermin.

He holsters his weapon. “Well, you took your fair share today,” he says.

Dorian doesn’t quite smile. “I’ll send you the bill.” His tone of voice is—John doesn’t know what it is. It’s a new tone, a little like the familiar humor, but a little like Dorian’s trying to tell him a secret in this smoke-filled, crowded hallway. Does Dorian know what he meant? If so, how? What technology overheard the exchange in Sandra’s office that Dorian might have hijacked? John lets it go. For now.

Android Tech offers to deliver Dorian to Rudy’s lab for inspection, but John waves them off. “I’ll do it,” he says, because he needs to know something. In the car, he asks. “The woman you shot. You put five into her, perfect incapacitation shots. Why didn’t you just kill her, to be sure?”

“I was between you and her,” Dorian replies. “And she might have information INTERPOL can use, to locate the group who stole the weapons from the Ukraine.”

John’s neck feels tacky with dried sweat. He wonders how to say what he wants to say without making Dorian want to report him. “There’s no gray area here,” he says. “She was actively firing on a police officer and her intended victim. Sometimes, it’s better not to take risks.”

“You’re saying you’d be happier if I’d murdered her.”

John glares at him. “That’s not murder.”

“At my processing speed?” Dorian shrugs, and John sees that too-common smile, “it’s pretty close to premeditation. The fact that I’m a law enforcement officer might make it a gray area.” He pauses. “Do you think that’s a gray area, John? Legally speaking, I mean? Or morally?”

John scratches his hair and frowns. “Shut up.”

Dorian does, and John drops him off without another word. Rudy will do whatever, and have him sent back to the charging bay.

At home, John floats a virtual screen over to his treadmill, strips down to his shorts, and climbs on. It’s a little easier to walk and run every day, a little more natural. His leg still hurts but he’s trying to work with it, stop fighting it. He’s trying because he promised Sandra he would, and he doesn’t want to be the weak link in the chain again. Ever.

He gets the pace up to four miles an hour on variable incline now, before his brain has to tell his leg how to walk, to actively think about what it takes to make the limb bend at the knee, contract

and release artificial muscle, transfer his weight from fake heel to fake toe. He drops the pace until he doesn’t have to think, like the physical therapists told him to. Three-point-eight. That’s still good, better than when he started back to work.

Then he logs into the department system by remote, and opens DRN-0167’s service record. Even with heavy redaction, there’s enough for him to learn things. Dorian had almost five years on the line before he was decommissioned, which means he arrived in one of the first two waves of DRNs into service. Which means the integrity of his—chassis, skeleton, whatever they call them these days—is more solid than the bots that came after him, once his model impressed all the higher-ups with the beatings it could take. Dorian has seventeen cleared kills on his sheet, eighty-four injuries, five-hundred-and-nine discharges of a weapon in live-fire conditions, and zero questionable finds on investigation. He had two different partners over his initial term, but the record doesn’t state who the partners were, and the redaction includes all seventeen kills, so John can’t guess.

Maybe John was wrong about DRNs. Maybe this one’s okay.

He asks questions about the morality of choosing kill shots over incapacitation, like he really wants to learn.

Shit. Maybe Dorian is crazy.

He still isn’t a person.

John turns off the treadmill and walks to his desk, picks up the flimsy he’s using to write his journal, the one Tilden told him to write and swore to him he’d never be required to turn over as evidence, for any reason, even under threat of termination or during the execution of a warrant. The journal is supposed to be about his insomnia, his flashbacks, his weird dreams, and the stuff that triggers problems for him. There isn’t enough money in the world to make him think about that stuff on his free time. That’s what whiskey’s for.

I called androids bullet catchers, yesterday. I meant MXs, but Dorian took seven direct hits on this case. Only one had the mass and velocity to punch through his tactical armor, but he stepped in front of it without hesitation.

I’d have done the same for Pelham, maybe for any real cop, if I was in heavy tac gear. I wonder if Dorian knows whether or not he can be damaged, before he makes decisions. I wonder if they’re decisions at all. I should talk to Rudy, but I don’t know if I’d understand what he told me.

It's not important.

Lock. Kennex, John. Birthdate January 14, 2007

He's got hours before he'll sleep, and after seventeen months in a coma, a ruined reputation on the Force, and an admittedly bad attitude when he woke up, he can count the people he might call on one hand. He doesn't want to talk to anybody, anyway.

He goes back to the treadmill. Biomech isn't the natural process all the biotech people like to pitch it as. He sets a slow pace, under three miles an hour that after seventeen months asleep, still makes him sweat.

He logs into the police database and codes his research to private, calls up records on the law enforcement synthetics program. No cop's research is really private, but the machines and John's peers won't be allowed in, this way. If Sandra checks up on him, she'll probably wonder why he waited this long to start investigating.

Just in case Dr. Tilden pokes around, John calls up the statistics on his leg too, but he minimizes the window because he still hates it and it clearly still hates him. Just the thought makes him stumble, and he has to pause the treadmill for a second.

Some of this stuff, he remembers because of the media coverage: Nigel Vaughn's "technological breakthrough" in 2027, the Synthetic Soul that John's mother had believed at the time was nothing more than a catchy product label. Bi-pedal synthetics had been around since the early '20s, but their applications changed when Vaughn opened LumoCorp for big-time business.

LumoCorp hadn't wasted much time on private-sector products. Its police pilot line—DRAs—had shown up in John's precinct over 15 years ago, back in 2032. Uniformed cops, they'd been designed to appear female, a little bulky, and not so human that they distracted men or annoyed women. He hears his mother's voice in his head, droll and amused as she predicted the future: *they'll present feminine models first, something to lure the lizard brain of male decision makers. I'll bet you your allowance money, dear, that they'll be blonde.*

She said that back when he was a junior in high school, and she'd been wrong about the blonde hair but her reasoning held. Looking back on it, John wonders how much planning went into that bot's appearance, LumoCorp's luring in of humanity; the DRAs, while they looked a lot more like machines than Dorian or even MXs do, had

been designed to entice a human population, just like his mother meant.

His leg really does hate him. It's not the other way around, no matter what Tilden says, because his hip feels like it's on fire, and the implanted socket burns.

He turns off the treadmill and floats the monitor back to his desk. He's got more to worry about than a synthetic leg or battle scars or an android partner, as long as it's not an MX like the model that left him and Pelham to die.

He needs to find Anna, his rat fake girlfriend who made him a pawn in her criminal game.

He waves his hand to wake up the case board he's been building since he woke up and a nurse told him what day—what month, what year—it was. He kept it in his head, in the hospital. Now he keeps the case board on his desk, his displays, on post-its archived all around the house. The board is littered with too many questions, like pieces from a hundred different jigsaw puzzles and he doesn't even know how to sort them into the right piles. He just knows they're important, and that somewhere there's a key—maybe inside his head, maybe inside his house.

He glances over his shoulder at the open floor space, but he doesn't move. He wasted too many hours and too much pain wandering around it. Anyway, the house was scanned and sealed after he got blown half apart and his brain shut down on him. His mother's word and her skills are reliable as hell, and she says no one overrode the house security, that the police seal was broken only by Sandra Maldonado. Sandra had come in a week after the failed police raid, to empty his refrigerator and clean out his porn collection for him. They have a deal that goes back years, and a friendship that reaches beyond rank. He's got the codes to her place too, and he knows what skeletons he's supposed to clear out if, God forbid, she's ever the one down.

When he checks the time, he's shocked to find that three hours have slipped by and it's dark outside. The house adjusted so incrementally, he hadn't noticed. He wonders if he had some sort of brain seizure, but he doesn't remember any flashbacks, and he's still standing. Even his synthetic leg feels solid.

Tilden would say he spends too much time zoning out in front of pictures of crime scenes and corpses. John might agree. He waves off the overlays and turns on some music, pours a drink to dull the pain at the top of his thigh, where the leg hub was implanted. He needs to get some sleep.

~ ~ ~

A week doesn't pass before they catch a case where somebody committed murder with an artificial heart. It's a break from John's off-the-books investigation, which is going in such tight circles he's wearing new grooves into his brain. The case is urgent. It's important.

Dorian mucks it up.

One DRN can be annoying as hell. Two lead down the road to crazy-town, but they remind John that whatever Dorian is or isn't, his programming lets him think he can want things. Dorian wants to be a cop; he wants to annoy John; he wants to know all kinds of personal things John isn't going to tell him; he wants to help another android. John talks to him like a real person now, acknowledging not just that he's different from MXs, but that riding with Dorian means he can't avoid dealing with those wants.

Five more people die before John can trace the extortion ring back to the mortician they started out with. After they get the artificial heart manufacturer to fix the problems it caused for the victims of the blackmail ring, John sends Dorian to the charging bay and goes back to the precinct office to make his report. It bothers him that Dorian was able to restore and remove memory from the DRN he dragged for a ride along. It bothers him that stored memory can just be stripped away like that, and that androids can do that to each other, with tech, like humans try to do it to themselves with booze and drugs and memory scrubbers.

This might be another place where Dorian acts kind-of human, though, understands greater rights and lesser wrongs. Leaving that DRN with memories of what it wanted and couldn't have would have been cruel. On the other hand, what's a personality that isn't based on experience and memory?

Another MX got junked on this case anyway. Those things just don't seem built to last.

John finishes his case summary and files his bi-weekly report on Dorian, checking the boxes about his behavior and field performance. Dorian was good in the field, in spite of the little ride-along robot rebellion. They brought down the organ blackmail ring with only two shots fired; it was solid detective work.

John wonders why he doesn't report Dorian for being the root cause of the damage to a drone and the third MX on John's watch. Maybe it's because Dorian didn't report him for beating on that InSyndicate scum, or because Dorian wanted

to "be that guy" for the other DRN. John sees something familiar, in that. It's not like he can miss it, since Dorian spelled it out.

He walks all the way to Rudy's lab, bypassing vehicles and pedestrian slides. He can justify skipping the treadmill, for this, and it's time to find out if Dorian has any privacy at all, or if covering for an android just exposes John to termination at his next performance review.

As usual, Rudy's up to his elbows in artificial body parts. The guy really, really needs to get out more. "Rudy!"

Rudy looks up, looks happy. "John!" Then he looks behind John and frowns. "Where's Dorian?"

John pokes a bony shoulder on his way to a chair. "That's your problem. You're more excited to see an android than you are a human."

Rudy tries not to look embarrassed, says, "Only some androids—and only some humans."

John smirks. He knows Rudy envies him. "Dorian made friends with a DRN tasked as a technician or something in a hospital." John waves a hand. "This case we closed today. Anyway, he gave it some information, and after the captain crawled up *my* ass about it, he took the information back. Can you do that to him?"

Rudy shakes his head, looks worried. "John, I'm—I can assure you that DRNs are amazingly discreet. They needed autonomy in order to ensure both the legal privacy and the confidence of the human police officers they served with. If you interacted—no, interacted is an odd word, isn't it?"

John figures out what Rudy isn't saying. "He didn't catch me jerking off, or something." Even if Dorian had, the department has strict rules about what data uploaded from an android can even be seen by human eyes, much less stored.

Rudy nods vigorously. "Quite right. Good. Committing a crime, then? Again, unless it was literally a felony of such proportions, I think he'd keep mum. Can you give me some context here, so I'll understand what—"

John squeezes the bridge of his nose. "I did not commit a felony, Rudy." Though he kind of has. Definitely has. For a greater good. "Dorian pries. All the time. I'm not gonna answer his questions if they can be removed, and he'll just start pestering me all over again the next day. Better to set the boundary now."

Rudy laughs. John doesn't see what's so funny, even when Rudy says, "He's designed to be

curious. It's a part of being a good detective, isn't it?"

"You're not answering my question."

Rudy's relaxed again because he turns back to his work, an arm whose hand keeps grasping at empty air. "Dorian was re-activated under police protocols. Because data he uploads may be used in the prosecution of a case, selective erasure is impossible." He huffs out a laugh. "Can you imagine the field day a defense attorney would have with that?"

"Okay," John says, because it's a good point. But it brings up a more interesting question. "Why isn't everything he sees public record? The MXs share a database." John knows this, because they use each other's information all the time to stalk him. He reminds himself that it's not personal, that MXs stalk all cops.

"We can't store it."

John waits, but Rudy seems done. What is the matter with people? They either give him one-word answers, or dissertations on a subject. "Because...?" he says.

Rudy is focused on his—the—arm. "With the multi-layered SVLSI chips Dorian runs on..." the arm flexes at the elbow, and the hand makes a fist. "Imagine every moment, every thought, every sound, every touch, every experience you have, plus every connection you make between all of those individual events over the course of a day, then multiply that by every sensor Dorian has. That's how much data we're dealing with before we figure in the effects of Synthetic Soul. We'd have to use DNA storage, which as I'm sure you know is both slow and expensive. So Dorian has internal storage much like the human brain. He has to determine what data sets to upload."

If I report anything, it's because I decided it needed to be reported....

Rudy could be lying. Rudy might be socially awkward, but he's a fucking genius, and maybe John doesn't have clearance for this. "That's a load of crap," he says, testing. "I've seen you on his net."

The fingers on the arm twitch. "Think of it like a telephone call, John. He opens the line, and he can close it."

John narrows his eyes, aiming for the look he gives a suspect in the box. "You sure you're not the one who opens and closes that line?"

There it is, the telltale swallow. Androids aren't the only ones who can tell when somebody's lying.

"Police bots make tens of thousands of queries a day. The ability to review data queries of a DRN is a diagnostic tool. Also, when he's offline there are certain hardware checks I'm able to make, but if you're asking whether or not I can read his thoughts? Tap into all his memories? No. I wish I could. I worry about him." Rudy fiddles with something on the arm that makes the fist clench and relax. "I worried about all of them. For all the good it did them."

Well, crap. "Look," John says, and clears his throat. "I'm starting to get it, maybe. He's—" he flounders, looking for the right words, "he's really advanced."

Rudy nods, but he doesn't look John's way. "John, if there's a problem... is he keeping something from you? Is there something you're not saying?" He trails off. The fingers on the artificial hand freeze.

John has forgotten why he came here. "No, he's good. I'm good. Thanks, Rudy. See you tomorrow." He gets out of the lab before Rudy makes him feel guilty.

At home, strips to his shorts and steps onto his treadmill. He used to love to run on it, staring out at the bay, but he's coming to hate this machine almost as much as he hates his leg. He logs into the system, opens his coded research. He ticks up the pace on his treadmill, easing into a jog and ignoring the pain.

His leg cooperates, so he tells the computer to read the file to him.

"The sixth precinct became the first in the city to fully integrate," it says, "followed closely by the states of California and the entire Pacific West district. In the sixth precinct, six hundred DRD models replaced two thousand, one hundred and twelve uniformed human officers. Income from issuance of misdemeanor fines increased by two thousand, one-hundred-twelve percent, which exceeded the costs of charging the synthetic units."

John remembers. Androids didn't take weekends, didn't need a benefits package, and most importantly didn't die in the line of duty because they weren't alive in the first place. LumoCorp wasn't just great at robotics. They'd been great with money, and low-balled every municipality's leases. Everybody won.

The computer drones on.

"Youth tagging of synthetics became a public relations concern that LumoCorp solved by revising the products' outer membranes to more closely resemble human skin, altering the androids' protocols to increase their freedom

to maintain their hardware security, and recommending cloth uniforms that could be more easily recycled. Charging bays were expanded to include synthetic unit equipment storage and supply areas. DRDs and the subsequent DRI line exceeded performance expectations and operated at a lower-than-expected cost per unit. The overwhelming majority of human complaints stopped within one hundred days of integration.”

John remembers liking those DRIs. He hadn't interacted with them much, but he'd been impressed that they grinned when he flashed his badge after hours, and he'd appreciated the value of keeping human cops out of the line of fire for simple stuff like traffic stops and foot patrols. They were worth the loss of manpower, because they saved lives and improved public safety.

“Stop,” he tells the computer, because so far it doesn't seem like he has any holes in his memory. “Summarize DRN series technology, introduction, integration, performance shortfalls, and decommissioning.”

Text scrolls too fast for the eye to follow, then slows when the computer talks some more. “With the success of the DRA and DRI series, LumoCorp exited private sector robotics and focused the main of its research and development capacity on the DRN android series,” it reads. John ups the treadmill pace a little more. “The DRNs were platformed on the Eujuneo Pendant learning module, enhanced with state-of-the-art processing cores and Synthetic Soul synaptic integration. Their increased processing power, coupled with changes in technology and property law, led LumoCorp to re-assert its claim that the DR series met, without reservation, all legal and ethical criteria of sentient life.”

John's leg seizes and he grabs the handrails. Pain shoots up through his hip and into his belly. “How the hell did I not remember that?”

“Query?”

He slows the treadmill to three miles an hour. The pain keeps flaring. “Continue.”

“DRN integration schedule exceeded expectations, and full implementation was achieved eighty-seven days in advance of contract. Initial reports of problems with the model were at first addressed by contracted systems analysis and software upgrades. However, when the first DRNs broke protocols, contracts were reviewed. Legislators began a review of alternative robotics solutions. The sixth precinct, the first to integrate, was the last station to de-integrate. Units that passed the Luger test were retained as backups for units that remained operational in three precincts city-wide,

as the logic-based MX was introduced and the DRN program was phased out.”

The computer keeps narrating and John keeps walking. He remembers most of this, after all. He remembers seeing DRNs on the news, in the precinct before the failures. He remembers thinking maybe he should have been more worried about the uniforms' jobs, because DRNs seemed to be pretty good detectives. He remembers when he saw a crazy one put its gun into its eye socket and pull the trigger. He remembers being glad the MXs replaced the model, right up until he wasn't.

He stops the treadmill and waves the computer off.

His discarded shirt makes a great towel for the sweat that drips off his face and neck. He pours himself a drink, and picks up his journal.

“I want to be that person for him.” Creeps me the hell out. The way Dorian looked at me, like I was meant to save him when all I've done so far is not throw him out of my car. And let him call me by my name. That was a mistake. Now it's all “John” this, and “John” that, and “How's your leg today?” and “Did you talk to it like I showed you?” and “How much do you donate? As a percentage of your income?”

It's not so bad that he asks, I guess. It's that I feel like I'm talking to a real person. I'm saying I'm not ashamed of my fake leg before I even think about it, because I don't want an android to feel bad. I wonder what Tilden would make of that? Hell, maybe he'd be glad I'm not rejecting more synthetic tech.

Lock. Kennex, John. January 14, 2007

~ ~ ~

Three days later, they're at an expensive hotel where some guy got dead. The vic was a sexbot maker named Sebastian Jones. John's never used a sexbot, and he doesn't have much of an opinion about them or their maker. But the shooters who did Jones were pros; the room has been coated with suspect DNA, the shell casings they left behind were third-generation absorption rounds, and they wore flash masks so no hotel camera has a useable image of them.

The case evolves from a simple murder to conspiracy when the sexbot sheds the DNA of a missing person. Three hours later, another woman is abducted with the same M.O., but this time her son was left behind in the family SUV. Dorian

craps all over John in front of Valerie Stahl, telling her John hates kids and cats and some other shit John denies before he even hears what the android is saying. He wants to flash an intra-office message: *if Dorian tells you anything about me, assume the opposite is true.*

When he questions the son, Victor, it goes fine, which he totally expected. John wants Dorian to tell Valerie Stahl *that*, but he still isn't interested in her, she's still out of his league, and bringing her up will only fuel Dorian's perverse interest in John's private life. Dorian's interest is already like a self-contained flare; it doesn't need outside fuel to keep it burning.

Until the intel from Victor turns up a lead, Stahl points them to Aurelian Sapiens and the vic's business partner, Lorenzo Shaw. They aren't two minutes out of the precinct when Dorian asks, "What do you tell a small child when someone dies?"

This question takes John completely by surprise, and he wishes they were back at the station and Dorian was just crapping on him in front of Valerie. Kristen Haseman could be dead already, but for her kid he hopes she isn't.

"I've never considered that," Dorian continues, "what you would tell a small child."

Dorian isn't just making conversation. This is another Big Question, the kind he saves for the privacy of the car and wants John to help him understand. "Well," John says, "you'd say the same thing you'd say to an adult."

"What do they say?"

Christ. "You tell him that the person that died has gone to a better place."

"Why would anyone say that when there's no way to really know where living things go once they stop living?"

John watches streetlights flash by, and thinks about how Dorian phrased the question: *living things*, and *when they stop living*. Not *people*, and *when people die*. "It's designed to give hope, comfort," he says. "To ease the pain. People believe it because they need to." It's as good an explanation as any, but he doesn't know if Dorian can comprehend believing something because you want to, because it makes you feel better, without any empirical data to back it up.

"Hmm," Dorian says. "The data I've studied suggest that the best proof of one's existence is if one is remembered after they're gone. Was your partner's son told that his father went to a better place?"

It's hard not to flinch. Dorian's supposed to be so intuitive, and he opened little Marty's gift himself, the one John never delivered; he should have put it together. "I don't know."

The pause is brief. "You never spoke to your partner's son," Dorian says. John tries not to respond to what sounds like empathy. "I can understand why that would be hard for you."

How? John wants to ask for maybe the hundredth time. He's started a list of his own Big Questions. How the hell could Dorian possibly understand why it's hard for him to go and see Pelham's wife, Pelham's son, after all this time has passed for them but so little has passed for him? Does Dorian get that John, by letting Anna into his life, probably leaked information that caused the deaths of all those cops?

Is it just Dorian's colloquialism thing? *I can understand*, then fill in the blank or repeat whatever the speaker said?

John sees annoying conversations with Rudy in his future.

They meet Lorenzo. Dorian collects some intel, and John thinks maybe Dorian insulted him about getting distracted by bots that were designed to be distracting. It's not fair. They find Yuri Idrizi, though, and not much later, they find the sexbot from Jones' hotel room, stripped of all its humanizing features: no hair, no dermal layer, no fingernails, no nipples, no nothing. All that's left is the body, which they deliver to Rudy, who disassembles its head while they wait, to get at any remains of its memory.

Dorian does that thing again that makes John suspect the whole colloquial subroutine. This android is pissed. No way is somebody crazy enough to program pissed off into a personality subroutine. Except that Dorian is definitely pissed.

Rudy empathizes, apologizes, asks if Dorian wants to wait somewhere else so he doesn't have to watch the robot dissection.

Dorian stays pissed.

It's worse later, in the car, when Dorian goes mute in the weird way. John rolls his eyes, but he asks. "You're quiet. What's wrong?" He hopes the answer is "nothing." He's sure it won't be.

Dorian flashes a tiny shadow of his usual humor. "Just—looking at that bot on Rudy's table. Makes me think. Who is going to remember me?"

That Big Question, at least, has an easy answer, or would if Dorian were human. John says it anyway. "You're a cop. The people you help will

remember you.” They’ll remember a DRN, anyway. He adds, “Whatever your name is.”

Dorian looks pretty happy with that, so John counts himself lucky he won’t have to do anything else. Babysitting an android....

Dorian perks up some more. “Speaking of names,” he says, “someone just responded to your dating profile, John.”

“My dating pro—I thought you were kidding!”

“Not kidding.” Dorian laughs. “I saw the way you were looking at those sexbots. Your profile name is Dr. Richard.”

He’s going to kill another android. “Dr. Richard.”

“He likes quiche, long walks on the beach, smooth jazz...”

Definitely killing another android. Today. An MX would abandon him to certain death, but at least it wouldn’t try to fucking set him up on dates.

“I ran a bioscan, and it looked like your testicles were at full capacity.”

He’s—it’s— “You’re scanning my balls?” It’s scanning his balls. It’s—no way. John’s going to find the person who wrote the colloquialism routine and kill *them*.

“I didn’t enjoy it,” Dorian says, and John doesn’t know if that’s supposed to be better or worse. “I just—I can’t help but notice. You’re backed up.”

This is why he should never, *ever* try and be helpful with Dorian. It never ends well for him. He beats back embarrassment while Dorian sits in the passenger seat, waiting. It’s the *patient* quiet.

He doesn’t take his eyes off the road, because if Dorian’s smirking right now, John won’t be held responsible for his actions. “Don’t scan my testicles,” he orders. “Ever again.”

“Copy that.”

But the fact of the matter is, John doesn’t meet people, outside the precinct. And if he did, after Anna, he doesn’t know how he’d trust one. Maybe the “Dr. Richard” handle was a good idea after all.

He glances over, feels his neck heat up. He’s going to regret this. Eyes locked firmly on the street in front of him, he asks, “What does she look like?”

“What do you want her to look like?”

He talks fast, ignores that weird tone of voice. “Brown eyes. Soulful. Average height. I like brunettes.”

“Would you date anyone in your profession, or would you prefer to date someone outside of it?”

“Sure. Either way. I like smart women, you know? Women who are smarter than me.”

“That won’t be hard.”

John gets it, and gives up on trying not to smile. The ball scanning is forgiven.

Dorian says, “You are aware that you just described Detective Stahl, right?”

He did not, and he’s not falling for that. Valerie is beautiful, and so what if she’s got soulful eyes and brunette hair and is way smarter than him? She’s ten years younger than he is, and she’s a chrome so she’ll live to be at least ten years older. She is so far out of his league, the light from her planet takes years to reach his.

~ ~ ~

The DNA in the sexbot, Vanessa’s, skin belongs to another missing person. Back at the station John tries to question her, but he doesn’t get very far. She hasn’t seen any of the missing women, and she doesn’t know her origin or ownership data.

Dorian cuts in. “Do you know where you were born?”

Shit. Seriously? The sexbot still doesn’t answer, but she smiles at Dorian. Like he’s a person. John gets an idea and shows her the other sexbot that left DNA trails in the hotel where Sebastian Jones was killed. “You ever work with this girl?” he asks.

“Charlene,” she says.

“Do you know where she was... born?” Nothing. “Who owns you?” he asks again.

Dorian interrupts. “She’s probably not conscious of those terms.” He doesn’t sound happy. Good. John’s not happy either.

He tries another approach. “We think they were taking you to be destroyed.”

“Why would anybody want to destroy me?” she asks. “There are much, much better things to do with me.” The hand on his leg leaves no doubt. “People look for connections in different ways.” She skips past his groin and up to his chest. John doesn’t know if stopping her would be an insult or something. “That’s all people are looking for,” she says. “Someone who cares about them.”

John looks to Dorian for help. Dorian, damn him, lets him flounder. John’s done. He takes her wrist and pushes her hand off him.

The bot looks down at the image of the sexbot that the Albanians have already destroyed. "Do you know where Charlene is?" she asks Dorian.

Dorian says, "Yes."

John remembers the bot frame on Rudy's table. Dorian's anger as Rudy pried apart the head.

"Can I see her?" Vanessa asks.

"Why do you want to?" Dorian asks.

She looks confused. "I don't know."

"You were designed to bond with people." Dorian's using that overly sincere, working-with-the-public voice. "That's what you were developed to do."

Shit, John thinks. He eases out of the way.

"To notice when they're there," Dorian says. "That also means you notice when they're *not* there. That's what you want to see her. That's what you're feeling."

John steps away from Dorian's little enlightenment session, but not before he has his own epiphany. Is Dorian designed to bond with people? To notice when they're there and when they're not there? Does Dorian want to see people he prioritizes as important? Does he think he feels for them?

Dorian has proved he notices plenty about his partner. John might say it's like any good cop would, if not for Dorian pestering him about the picture of John and Martin Pelham's family that sits on his desk, or prying until John let him open Marty Junior's two-year-old birthday present, or the accusations about kids and cats, the ball scanning....

John feels it like a weight, a responsibility he doesn't want and didn't ask for. He rejects it whole cloth.

"Who told you to go with the men we found you with tonight?" John asks the sexbot.

"Yuri," she says, and John is ecstatic to be able to focus only on the case. She asks, "Do you know Yuri?"

He hasn't wanted to rush in and shoot somebody this badly in a while. Almost two years, to be exact.

They don't find the skin lab, but Dorian finds a clue, something about the sexbots' learning modules and how they're the same processors that were used in DRNs. John listens in on the call to Rudy, and doesn't flinch when Rudy says the bot

was "born" instead of "made," too. Of course Rudy thinks about androids like that. Rudy always did.

But Rudy finds her origin point fast enough that they don't even stand down the strike team, just re-route to the new location.

Yuri is trying to shut down their operation. It's the smart play, but if John's too late to save the missing woman, he isn't sure what he'll do. He's happy to put four into an armed asshole firing at him, but he gets separated from the MXs bringing up the rear when he runs between two rows of computers.

He turns the corner, sees Yuri, and his focus narrows, peripheral vision fading as he sights down his gun barrel. "Drop the weapon, Yuri!" he shouts. He hopes Yuri won't.

"John!" Dorian yells from behind him, and John looks in time to see Dorian put a second round into the chest of a guy who's already on the floor. *At my processing speed...* It might shock him, if he took the time to think about it. Then Dorian touches his back and John realizes he was wide open.

He leaves Yuri to the MXs and runs on, with Dorian at his back, looking for the women. They find more than they expected, and most are still alive. Kristen Haseman is alive, and John thinks about her son, Victor, waiting while his father rushes home from Lithuania and scared he'll never see his mom again. This is why John's a cop. This is why it's worth it.

Back at the precinct, John tells Dorian to go charge before he sneaks off to the racks and tries to sleep, but he can only stare at the ceiling. It took time at the crime scene, and it'll be three or four hours before Kristen Haseman will be released to come back here and pick up her son. John wants to be here when she does, and he thinks Dorian will, too.

He gives up on sleep when he hears the air vent/filtration system power up for day shift, grabs a shower and puts on his only clean shirt. Nobody expects him to work today, but Dorian should be in the bullpen by 8:00. John drinks coffee and reads over his blurry prelim report, then realizes that Dorian has been in the bullpen since before John walked in. John blinks at his coffee. Clearly, he needs something stronger.

He sees the blue light show before Dorian turns with that purposeful stride, and knows Kristen Haseman is waiting at visitor intake. He comms Child Services to have Victor brought up. When Dorian escorts Haseman in, it's perfect: shrieked, "Mommy, mommy, mommy!" and Ms. Haseman's much more faint, "Victor, oh my baby."

When Victor wriggles from her arms and reaches to John for a hug, John sends a superior smile toward his android over the kid's shoulder. Dorian just smirks, like it should all be beneath a well-adjusted human.

John smiles harder. Maybe it should be, but nobody would claim John Kennex is well adjusted.

He gives Victor back to his mother and is heading toward his desk when Valerie Stahl arrives. "Great work," she tells him. She's definitely impressed with him right now.

"Thanks."

"You should celebrate."

"He will," Dorian says. To John, he says, "You have a date." Dorian outs him about the stupid dating website that is *totally Dorian's fault*, and bot-blocks him with Valerie—Valerie who he is absolutely not interested in, and who he isn't going to *get* interested in. John still lets him go when Dorian says he wants to be there when they turn off Vanessa. It kind of bothers him, Dorian caring like that, so fast, for a bot. Maybe he saw something in her that looked too familiar. John did.

He wants to be somewhere too, somewhere he should have gone a long time ago. While Dorian's gone John calls Maria Pelham again to confirm that he'll swing by after shift.

Dorian returns a while later, and John sees the record of deactivation link to his case file. He doesn't look at Dorian. "Check my report will you?" he asks, and throws his report from his terminal to the pull-out display Dorian usually takes. He could leave right now, but it's barely noon and he won't sleep, anyway. He's staying until Marty Junior gets home from school. Then he'll leave.

His report slides back onto his monitor a second later, with bright red tracking marks all over it. Dorian's trying to annoy him. John lets him get away with it and revises the report, because Dorian's working too hard to act like everything is normal. John ignores that too.

At two-thirty, he squeezes Dorian's shoulder and says, "See ya," then he goes to Pelham's house. An hour with Maria and Marty Junior takes a lot out of him, and he feels like he's been up for days. He promises to come back soon, with no idea whether or not he can keep them. He goes home with Dorian in his head.

His leg crapped out on him four times on his way to Pelham's house, but at home he ignores his treadmill and his physical therapy, pours a drink, picks up his journal flimsy and starts up his

stylized shorthand with a fingernail. He meanders some, writes about Maria Pelham, how weird it is that she and Marty Junior are doing so well.

Stupid coma.

It takes a while, to get to what's eating at him today.

Dorian does what it takes to get the job done. He leads me in when he thinks it's too dangerous for me to go first, but he doesn't pretend he can push me around. He fires fast if someone's aiming a gun my way. Maybe he's learning from me, and maybe that's not such a good thing: he double-tapped that guy last night, put a second bullet in him while the guy collapsed to the floor. I think it was because the shooter was behind me, and I didn't know I was vulnerable. But his first shot removed the threat. He could have left the guy alive, for information. MXs were behind him.

I felt him touch me after, square on my back, like human cops do to let you know they have you covered.

It made me remember too much about partnerships, shit that doesn't help me at all. Neither did last night's insomnia, or working with Dorian after he came back from watching Vanessa get destroyed, even though he tried to pretend like nothing was wrong. Who programs a machine to reveal that it's pretending something? Nobody does.

Top that off with seeing Maria and Marty Junior doing so well... longest day I've had in a while.

I'm glad they're good. I am. But they remind me that seventeen months in a coma is seventeen months everyone else had to get on with their lives, to grieve, to forget. I'm closer to it than anyone else—to good people dying, to losing my leg, to all of it.

Back before the raid on the precinct, Dorian told me he feels. Just as much as I do.

I hope to hell he doesn't. What I feel sucks, and I've had an entire life to learn how to deal with feelings. If DRNs felt as much as humans do, it's no wonder some of them went nuts.

Lock. Kennex, John. January 14, 2007

~ ~ ~

It's been a bad week. Two teenaged chromes are dead, so people are breathing down the commissioner's neck even while they keep secrets.

If that weren't bad enough, now Dorian's busting him in a public hallway in the precinct. "I know you've been taking Membliss, John," he says as they walk along. "I'm required to give updates on your mental and physical condition every seventy-two hours. You thought I wouldn't detect it?"

John doesn't know what he thought, but he did think he was the only one required to report on his partner's status twice a week. Dorian sounds accusatory. John's been late for dates plenty of times. He knows that voice.

When John doesn't answer, Dorian raises his voice loud enough that somebody—an MX, comms systems, a passing officer in the hallway—might hear. "Are you seeing a recollectionist?" *Again* lies unspoken between them.

"Look, I've got it under control," he says, to shut Dorian up. Dorian is too good at forcing his hand. John keeps walking while Dorian starts in with a lecture about the risks, makes sure it looks like any other day when John is ignoring his android who won't shut up, until he runs out of patience and turns, using a hand to stop Dorian and back him up toward a wall. "I need those pills to help me. They open up memory clusters so I can remember things."

Dorian meets his eyes. "About the ambush."

"Right," he says. Dorian's eyes shift minutely, probably scanning him, and John realizes that he lost his cool. He reins in his feelings, his desperation, his need to make up for what happened two years ago. He reins everything in tight. "Look," he says, as even and calm as if he were talking to an MX, "I've got it under control." He's not sure Dorian believes him, but Dorian shuts up about it.

When John wrecks the patrol car an hour later, it's impossible for even John to believe himself.

He focuses on the case, tries to downplay the fact that a piece of pipe ripped off Dorian's ear when John wrecked the car. "It doesn't look that bad," he says, while they wait for their suspect to open the door.

Dorian glares. "I'm sorry, could you speak up, please?" He says it loud, and John grits his teeth. *Bastard.*

As they head back to the car, Sandra texts him for a private meet at her favorite bar, and he knows he's in trouble.

He pitches the car keys to Dorian. "D. You drive," he says, because two wrecks in one day isn't worth the risk.

Being cooped up in the car with an annoyed android isn't a party, either. "I thought we had a deal, John," Dorian accuses before they're out of the suspect's driveway.

John curses under his breath. Dorian likes to drive, and John might have hoped letting him do it would distract Dorian from bitching. Dorian drives well, but he also drives at exactly the speed limit and obeys all traffic laws, which is the biggest reason John drives. Dorian gives him a look to back up the accusation. "I said I'd tell you when I thought it was safe enough—"

"You saw Reinhart three weeks ago," he says, cutting Dorian off. "With the captain. She's ready to negotiate with him, and he says he knows where Anna is. If he knows, maybe I know." He taps his temple.

Dorian turns his head to stare at John. "And maybe," he says, "if you fry your synapses, you'll never be able to retrieve the data you have stored in that hard head of yours. So no one in the department will ever know, and InSyndicate won't be stopped because you have the patience and self-preservation instincts of a three-year-old."

"Eyes on the road," John snaps, even though he knows Dorian is jacked into the car's sensors and doesn't need to look to see where he's going.

Dorian looks disgusted. "John. I'm not trying to protect you at the expense of a criminal network's activities. I'm trying to protect you so we can *find and stop* their activities. Can't you see the difference, man?"

He can. But he's still got a date with Sandra, who happens to be one of his oldest friends on the force and also his boss. "I'm gonna go quiet mode for a while," he says, "if it's all the same to you." He slumps in the passenger seat and closes his eyes.

Dorian keeps up with the lecture for a couple of minutes, but eventually it must register on his programming that John is in not-listening mode, too. So he starts singing. Which annoys John to hell and back. Dorian has perfect pitch. His voice was designed to be modulated and beautiful to listen to. And he can mimic any voice he wants. But when he's singing "for fun," as he says, he's just imperfect enough to get on John's nerves. John doesn't have to be a detective to know that's *exactly* why Dorian does it, just one more in a string of petty robot punishments Dorian has loaded in his arsenal.

John leaves Dorian in the precinct and goes to meet Sandra. When she asks, "So how're you feeling?" he says, "You sound like Dorian." He isn't sure Dorian ratted him out, but he wants to

believe Sandra found out on her own. She's known him a long time.

"Look John," she says. "I know who you are. And I care about you enough to tell you the truth. If you obsess about revenge, it'll take you down."

Maybe she's right. But it's been almost two years for her, too, and barely more than three months, for him. How is he supposed to walk away?

"Now that you're remembering things," she says, "we're gonna have to talk to Internal Affairs again."

So that's the reason for the off-the-books meeting. She knows more than she wants to.

He knows less than he needs to.

If he's talking to I.A. again, he's going to see the recollectionist one more time, eke out whatever he can get. Dorian's not his mother or his keeper, and if a human can't keep him from doing what needs to be done, there's no way an android will. John checks with Android Tech to confirm that Dorian's in charging before he drives to the Koln Avenue District. Dorian will still find out, because goddamn, that android is smart. But it's worth it when John remembers the nesting dolls Anna gave him when she came back from a trip to Montreal. They look innocuous, but he takes them to McGinnis in Crime Scene Analysis. McGinnis has helped him before, and she's one of the few people around who doesn't act like the raid, and InSyndicate, and Anna, are all ancient history. Or entirely his fault.

On the chrome murder case, he works out that two teenaged girls got dead because a parent got so obsessed with her losses, they sucked her into a hole she couldn't climb out of. Mom talks about her need for revenge, her need to make people pay. Then John sees Mom's murder board, a collection of evidence and photographs, connections and ideas, post-it notes hovered over everything. It looks so much like the case board John has been building at home, it shocks him. He understands this. He has been *doing* this.

After shift, John goes home and paces his house, feeling trapped by plex walls and too much floor space. He should have sold it, but he couldn't let it go. And if his mother is to be believed, her security will hold against all comers. So far, it looks like only John's precinct has penetrated it, and with Sandra's authority both times. Since he woke up John has paid some of the best people in the business to try.

He leans against his work desk and stares blindly at a pastel rainbow of e-notes that ask questions with no answers. *Who is Anna Moore? What is*

Goshen? Anna arrives in Rome. How did she pass a background check? Parisian underground protests. Keynote at Oxford? Where's Anna? Found her looking through files, claimed she was looking for photos. First visit to Rome? So many unanswered questions make him feel sick, tight in the throat like it's hard to breathe. Like he's drowning.

He swipes his case boards clean and leans against his desk. He has no idea where to go from here. Then McGinnis calls from Crime Scene Analysis, and tells him the dolls had nanotech in the paint. It was a transmitter. "Someone's been listening to you," she says. "The last upload was seven hours ago."

He disconnects without a word. He doesn't even thank her. Has he said anything, discussed a case with anyone? His windows are one-way view, and the security in them repels known surveillance tech. Who has he let in? Who has called?

His mother stayed for a few days, right when he got home, until he chased her out.

The physiologist who set up his leg's charger and gave him his physical therapy routine was here, but John barely answered her questions about pain and movement and his problem with the leg calibration.

Sandra visited a few times after he came home from the hospital center, but every time he tried to bring up the raid she'd said, "It's history, John. Literally. Over a year and a half ago. Get healthy, get back to work. Then we'll talk."

Dorian saw his case board that one day, but all he'd said was, "John?"

All John had said was, "Shut up," before he'd swiped the displays dark.

Lucky for him he's not a talker.

He looks back at the case board, wiped clean of all of the overlays, all the questions. Only the crime scene photos on the desk remain: bodies of criminals and cops, angles that show where all the bullet casings fell, all the explosives blew... his leg lying on the ground, where it landed after it tore away from his body. He has to let it go or turn into some crazy person who becomes only about the past—worse, a crazy person whose obsession lets people use him again, learn things they shouldn't. But he's had a listening device in his home for twenty-three months, and he did answer phone calls. Even if it wasn't about InSyndicate, he could have said something somebody could use.

He needs to tell Sandra, without telling his captain. He's not sure how clear that line is, anymore. He heads back to the patrol car, fast,

drives even faster to Rudy's lab. "How secure is Dorian?" he asks before Rudy can say hello.

"What?"

"How secure is he? And how good is he? If Dorian did a sweep-and-scan of an area, would he find everything? And if he did, could he keep it to himself?"

"If you asked him to, yes," Rudy says. "DRNs are very loyal. And Dorian, well, he's more special than most."

Sandra said something like that about Dorian too, but John doesn't have the time or the interest to work it out right now. "Okay. I'm dragging him out of the charge bay."

"He isn't in the charge bay," Rudy says.

John frowns. "What?" It's three hours after shift. Where else would he be?

Rudy frowns back. "John. Androids, even a DRN in an MX bay, need less than five hours to charge, and that's if they're run down to emergency backup. They're used for other purposes when not on primary duty. Dorian, because he's so good with people, takes witness statements on a split shift, when the two of you aren't on overtime."

"Witness statements."

Rudy looks shocked. "You ride in a car with him every day. How do you now *know* this?"

He doesn't know because Dorian didn't tell him. And John didn't ask because Dorian's an android.

John hits his comm. "Dorian."

"Yeah, John?" The answer is immediate, so if Dorian's with a victim now, he's prioritizing John.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the precinct."

Damned if Dorian *still* doesn't tell him what he's doing. John knows Dorian hid it on purpose, now. "What case are you on?" he asks.

"Yes, we can discuss that at your convenience, Detective," Dorian says, so he's still with the victim and it's not a petty crime.

"Wrap it up as soon as you can and log off on my I.D. I'll be in the bullpen in ten minutes to pick you up."

"Copy that."

While they're still in the precinct, John whispers, "Scan the car when we get to it. Scan everything

about it for listening devices. *Everything*. If you find something, block it or break it. Then talk."

Dorian raises his eyebrows, clearly interested in the puzzle. When they reach the car, John closes his door and waits while Dorian walks around its exterior, trailing his fingers over the surface. He runs a hand along the rear window frames, the headliner. He opens John's door, and John holds still when Dorian pats him down. The circuitry on fingers and thumb flashes as Dorian's hands contact the tech in John's pockets.

Dorian finishes his circuit, climbs into the passenger seat, then reaches out and touches the St. Christopher medal, turning it in his fingers like he did the first day they rode together. This time, his finger flashes blue.

"The car is clean," he says, and drops his hand. "What's the hell is going on?"

"My place wasn't, this morning," John says, and gets on the road. "Don't talk to me about traffic lights and speed limits."

"We could run the car's emergency lights."

John shakes his head. "I don't want whoever compromised me to know I'm cleaning house."

Dorian must jump onto the traffic and surveillance system, because lights turn green as John approaches them. He doesn't ask. He knows already that Dorian won't do it just for his convenience, and now he knows that if he pisses Dorian off, Dorian can add red lights to his list of petty robot punishments.

When John parks the cruiser in front of his house Dorian says, "Won't it seem strange, having me in the apartment in complete silence for the time it takes me to perform a passive sweep?"

John narrows his eyes, but Dorian just smiles brightly.

"You should show me around," Dorian says. "You can revel in your glory days if you want to."

John scowls. This is probably a new strategy of Dorian's to pry into his personal life. If it is, it works. John doles out details about half of the ribbons and trophies and holograms in his spare room, which doesn't bother him even though he suspects that Dorian has stopped his scanning and started mentally redecorating the room.

John's suspicions are confirmed when Dorian says, "You know, John, most people would put their beds in the bedroom."

"Most people are idiots," John replies. "I wake up to the best view in the house." He didn't mean to

share that, but it isn't Top Secret intelligence, so he sighs and moves on. "Anything else you want to know about my childhood?" he asks. "Vaccination records? First kiss?"

Blue tracers flash across Dorian's temple. "Your vaccination records are in the police database," he says. "And current. Your first kiss was with Darrius Watkins in the seventh grade. He was two years your senior."

John sputters. He can't even find words.

Dorian smirks. "You were his first kiss, too. He posted it on his e-Life timeline."

"I am never doing this again," John says. He figures anyone listening wouldn't believe the farce if he's polite, anyway.

"I'm surprised you're doing it now," Dorian replies, and he steps toward John.

John doesn't think about it until Dorian's so close that he grips John shoulder, right up by his neck, to keep him from backing away. Dorian doesn't have much in the way of boundaries, but this is close. Dorian's eyes dart around, an android thing that John would bet Dorian thinks conveys deep meaning. Then Dorian uses his free hand to point around the room, which only emphasizes for John how one hand is occupied, touching the bare skin of his neck. It feels weird, not natural like human skin but not annoying, either.

John frowns. "What?"

He stiffens when Dorian leans in, but he gets it when Dorian whispers, "Clear in here." His breath is very warm. Androids don't have lungs in there; they have heat dissipators.

John shrugs out from under the hand on his neck. "I'm done indulging an android. You can start walking back to the precinct any time you want."

"You're such a wonderful host, John," Dorian says, all mock-sincerity.

John watches him walk back to the front door, take off his jacket and hang it up, then bend to pull off his boots.

Dorian has feet. Normal-looking, human feet. John doesn't know why that shocks him. He knew the gray onesie they stored Dorian in wasn't skin; it was an anti-static protection suit. Still, John frowns. Feet. "What the hell are you doing?" he asks, more wary than annoyed.

"Living rooms are made for company," Dorian says as he shrugs out of his holster. "Living room furniture is made for comfort."

John plants himself between the door and his living area. "Yeah..."

Dorian smiles, full voltage. "I'm trying out your bed."

John doesn't even have to shift. "No you're not."

Dorian holds up his hands. "All right, all right. Nice rug, at least." He pads around the open plan area, picking up objects, asking questions. Dorian learns that yes, John plays guitar, that the replicas were John's dad's. John tells Dorian to shut up about the fact that the tires on his mountain bike are flat. He explains the books printed on paper (also his father's), and the smart house's customizations (his mother's).

"Your mother is extremely skilled," Dorian says.

"She's extremely smart."

"A smart woman," Dorian says in that slow, secretive tone. He meets John's gaze, holds it, and grins like he's trying not to. "Smarter than you."

That's when John realizes, finally, that his android has been flirting with him. He feels his neck heat up but he doesn't say anything, because Dorian can't know that's what he's doing. "I'm gonna heat some dinner," he says. "Look all you want."

Dorian dials down the smile. "Thanks, man. I can't believe you're honoring your bet to let me experience your personal life like this."

They've worked together for weeks, now, and John doesn't miss a beat. "I can't believe I made a bet with a robot."

He stays in the kitchen for as long as he can justify, hollering answers when he thinks he absolutely has to, trying to remember if Dorian used that tone of voice before the case with the sexbots. Yeah. Yeah, he did. In the scrubbers' alley, the underground hallway filled with smoke and cops and two downed criminals, Dorian said, *I'll send you the bill* in just that tone. John reminds himself that androids designed to work with the public are programmed to be attractive, appealing. Dorian's a far more advanced example than the first DRAs in LumoCorp's line.

Dorian calls out, "Hey, I didn't know you had cable."

The echo of voice, and the subject, means Dorian's in the loft. "My mom's!" he shouts. Then he wonders if he has to shout, and says in a normal voice, "She worked in hardware before she specialized in programming."

"What?"

He repeats it louder. Is that another behavior designed to make Dorian seem more human? The DRN Dorian took for a ride-along did the same thing, made John turn up the radio because it was in the back seat, when it could just as easily have listened in over its net. John's going to have a talk with Dorian about this—this faking shit.

"Why is it here?" Dorian calls.

"She stayed for a few days, right when I got home, and brought it with her to keep herself busy, I guess." He yells. "She's a parent. It's what they do."

Dorian appears in the kitchen doorway holding a bin filled with tools and miniaturized hardware, including cable that ranges from fiber-optic to gauges so fine John can barely see them. "Parents assemble micro-bot toys?" He looks too interested.

John scowls. "They visit when their kids are sick."

Dorian blinks and turns away. "She didn't spend much time in the hospital with you, after the first month."

John closes his eyes, thinks that Dorian's just a machine who doesn't know any better. It's probably an algebra problem, $A = B = C$: if mothers visit their kids when they're sick, and John was sick for seventeen months, his mother should have visited him.

"I think she thought I was going to die," he says.

Seconds pass before Dorian replies. "Oh." His voice is softer. "I'm sorry, John."

John sighs and rinses off his chopsticks. He has already eaten twice as much food as he wanted, and wiped down counters that were already clean. He's run out of ways to stall, in here, so he grabs a beer and heads into the living room, where he finds Dorian stretched out on his bed.

"What the *hell*, Dorian?" he demands. "That's my *bed*!"

"In your living room," Dorian says. "It's very comfortable."

"Get. Off." He swallows down half his beer. Criminals spying on him might be better than this.

Dorian rolls to his side and props his head up on a bent arm. "You do know that's a euphemism for orgasm, don't you?"

That answers one question; Dorian definitely knows he's flirting. "In this case," John says, "it's an order to get the hell off my bed before I shoot you and throw your scraps in the bay out there."

He points to the water, still and calm, outside the security glass.

Dorian ignores him and rolls around a little more, like he's luxuriating in the sensation of down comforter or soft mattress. The tracer lights at fingertips and along his cheek remind John that Dorian's scanning it, probably synching with its smart features to make sure they haven't been compromised. John turns his back and stares out at the water.

His robot partner flirts with him. What's he supposed to do about it? *Ignore it*, the smart part of his brain tells him. Ignore it like he ignores everything about Dorian that he doesn't want to deal with. Like he ignores Dorian getting philosophical about death, or grieving a deactivated sexbot, or trying to adopt another DRN or constantly pushing at John's boundaries. Like he ignores how he treats Dorian like a person.

The hand on his shoulder makes him flinch so hard, he shakes beer out of the bottle and over his hand.

"You're way too tense, John," Dorian says. Then he jerks his chin, a tiny, negative motion. "If letting me see your place bothers you that much, I can stop."

"Of course you should stop," John says. "Your interest in my personal life is totally inappropriate. And unhealthy." Dorian smiles and heads toward the door. "And *weird*," he yells at Dorian's back.

He watches Dorian's bare feet against the carpet.

At the door, Dorian dons his boots and holster, picks up his jacket. John sips his beer. "I take it you're done prying?" he asks.

Dorian meets his eyes and smiles the more familiar smile, the little one that only uses half of his face. "The place is clean," he says. "I found only one sensor, here by the door when I removed my boots—sorry about that, by the way—and deactivated it. It will look like the mic blew, possibly in response to the proximity of my net." Once he shoulders back into his jacket he asks, "Was it the nesting dolls?"

John scowls. "How did you guess?"

Dorian shrugs and walks back into the living area, drops into a chair like it's a natural thing for an android to do. "They were here before, and they weren't really 'you'. That's why I asked about the robotics parts, incidentally."

John narrows his eyes. “And the guitars? The holos? Going through my drawers? The stuff on my e-reader? My *bed*?”

Dorian’s smile flares briefly, then fades. “The good thing is, the technology in those dolls is very old, and the listening device had limited gain. You would have had to be at your desk for it to record anything.”

The video pickup for his phone is on his desk. “How do you know?”

“I just checked the department records. McGinnis charges very little time to overhead. Almost half of it coincides with visits from you.”

John drops heavily into a chair and sets his beer bottle on the floor. He’s going to have to take this to Reynolds in I.A., to keep McGinnis out of trouble and protect the precinct. Someone’s been listening in, as frequently as they wanted to, since before the raid two years ago.

John doesn’t remember work sucking this much. He doesn’t remember feeling like something—everything, *everyone*—is suspect.

“John.”

John doesn’t look up.

“John,” Dorian repeats. “Devices like that aren’t triggered remotely. It could have been uploading to nowhere.”

John turns his head to glare. “Yeah. That’s likely,” he says. He doesn’t try to hide his sarcasm. “Let’s bet on that.”

Dorian looks pained. He leans forward, clasps his hands together. “Then look on the bright side: once you report it, it may be possible to trace the upload address. This could be a lead, John.”

John looks over at his cleared crime board. “It’s not a lead I can use,” he says. He’s exhausted. “I can’t keep doing this. I’ll drive myself crazy and be useless as a cop.”

Dorian looks upset—like, lost little kid upset. “I don’t understand.”

John rubs his forehead, grips it hard and digs into his temples with finger and thumb. “It’s a human thing, Dorian. I don’t expect you to understand.”

The silence stretches, but if John has offended his robot, that’s his robot’s problem. John has bigger things to worry about. He picks up his beer and leans back in his chair, stares out the window at the bay.

“You’re worried you’ll obsess, misread information. Maybe decide the wrong person is guilty, or take matters into your own hands. Because everyone else has moved on but it’s still raw, for you. You feel alone with it.”

John surges out of his chair, riding on fury. He leans down over Dorian, shoves a finger against his chest, anger fueled by the certainty that he can’t cause the android any pain. “I let you in here to do a security sweep, not to read my personal, private information! Do you hear me?”

The initial look of—distress, whatever—fades, and tracer lights race over every circuit in Dorian’s skin. He looks down at John’s finger. “I haven’t,” he says. He’s quiet, so quiet John barely hears him over the static of rage in his ears. “I was just thinking about Mrs. Hoving. She said she tried to let her daughter’s death go, but it consumed her. Then I thought about you.”

The words shock every nerve, hot-and-cold pain like when they first attached his new leg to the implanted socket. A hand comes up, slow, touches John’s chest, and John flinches when Dorian looks up at him. Dorian’s too close. John’s too close.

“I haven’t invaded your privacy, John. I didn’t do what you just accused me of doing.” The pressure of Dorian’s palm is gentle, but it’s implacable, and John is forced back as Dorian rises out of the chair. Police bots are way stronger than humans. “Speaking as someone who has almost no privacy,” he says, “I wouldn’t take yours away from you.”

“Get your hand off me,” John says, but his own hand drops to his side. He’s still shaking, but he doesn’t know what to do with it now. Doesn’t know if Dorian read his journal and is lying about it, or if he really is that intuitive.

Dorian looks away, then he steps away. “I should go back to the station,” he says. “I might be running low on charge.”

“I’ll call you a sector car.”

“No need,” Dorian says. He’s halfway to the door already. “I’ve got it.” Then he’s out, and the door snicks shut behind him.

John scrubs his hands over his face. His skin burns from the dump of adrenaline. Running low on charge. Bullshit. He looks around, picks up the beer bottle and takes it to the recyc. More meetings with Internal Affairs. They’ll go over his place again. Go over his life again.

Maybe he should leave before he gets fired. Before he can do anymore damage or cost anyone else their lives.

He wonders what will happen to Dorian if he quits.

~ ~ ~

A week later, John thinks he might need to take his anger management a little more seriously.

His follow-up with Internal Affairs was as bad as he expected it to be, and after he got through three interviews without punching anyone, he was required to sign an affidavit swearing not to continue any off-the-books investigations. It doesn't mean he won't, but it does mean he'll be quicker to bring intel to someone's attention.

In the car, he glances over at Dorian, lets him get away with singing off key. They've only completed four shifts together since Dorian's scan of his house, and if Dorian thinks being pissy in private is going to get him somewhere, he's got a lot more shifts to figure out it's not going to work.

"Did you report that sweep-and-scan of my place?" John asks.

Dorian finishes his verse before he says, "No."

"Thanks. I need you to do another one, after I.A.'s."

Dorian stops singing. "You think Internal Affairs is going to plant bugs in your house. Are you sure you're not being obsessive, or misreading information, John?"

Okay, maybe he deserves that. "No," he says, since this is the first time Dorian has called him "John" in private since he left John's place.

Dorian goes quiet, his pondering-quiet. When the hell did John start thinking he recognized Dorian's silences? But he steels himself, because he knows he's not wrong.

"John..."

"Don't mention it," John says. "Please."

More silence. *Deciding-quiet*, he thinks. Then Dorian says, "Did you know that, even with modern anti-collision controls and increased effectiveness of impact protections, vehicular deaths have continued to rise steadily over the last fifteen years?"

John doesn't smile. "That's because more and more people can afford the cars, but too many of them can't afford the safety features or live in regions without the tech."

Dorian pauses. He's not any kind of quiet, now; he's just analyzing data. Maybe John needs to

make an appointment with Dr. Tilden. "Hmm. You're at least partly right."

"Don't sound so surprised," John says, and when Dorian looks his way, he tries to smile.

~ ~ ~

John spends two days in a precinct rack because he's not sleeping in his house while I.A. roots around in it. Dorian spends more time with him, since John's at the precinct all day, every day. They work on open cases and stay in the building until I.A. clears him, and Dorian asks personal questions that John mostly ignores.

After I.A. signs off on John's place, Dorian doesn't ask. Dorian just follows him to the cruiser after shift and rides home with him. Dorian isn't as chatty this time around, but he does remind John to give his mother back her stuff. He keeps all his gear on, and he stays off John's bed.

John watches him with narrowed eyes, and finally prods. "Last time, you had to take off half your gear and hump my bed, and this time it's not worth a second look?"

Dorian looks at him and smiles. "This time, it knows me." He says it in the flirty voice.

John wants to tell Dorian that "knows" is a euphemism for sex. He doesn't. If this euphemism stuff is the game, then his bed and his partner have gotten more play lately than he has.

Before he drives Dorian back to the station, John learns that his android is pretty tight with his house, too.

Late that night, John lies in his bed and stares out at lights on the bay. Most are still, but some move, barely-there motion that tells him someone is on the boat, walking around or making love, doing *something* to upset the quiet calm of the water.

He can't sleep because he keeps thinking about weird, stupid shit, like the fact that Dorian has human-looking feet. John doesn't have a foot fetish. In fact, he has always been pretty vanilla in bed. Maybe it's the flirty voice, or the novelty of an android with personality. Whatever the hell it is, John warns his smart bed to mind its own business and ignore the human jerking off under the covers. He has no idea what Dorian means when he says that software "tells" him things, and he doesn't want to find out. He doesn't think too closely that his robot partner makes him hot, either, because competence has always turned him on. Machine or not, Dorian is competent.

John spills into his hand, belly clenching and body tilting to one side because his phantom foot can't

dig into the bed like the real one used to. Dorian is definitely competent.

It's the best orgasm he's had since he woke up from his coma.

This is not good.

~ ~ ~

John calls in and takes some comp time, then he calls his mother and invites her to drop by later for a visit.

A few minutes before she's due to arrive, John turns off his locator chip. He has a quota of personal time, but he hasn't turned it off in weeks. The running shoes, he had to dig for in the back of his storage room. The box with her robotics toy is on the floor by the desk terminal. Which he opens. He logs into the precinct system and opens up everything he has on DRNs, Nigel Vaughn, Rudy's papers on Synthetic Soul, and Dorian, that he's willing to share.

The house announces his mother before she reaches the door, and lets her in without him having to tell it to. "Honey," she says. She looks windblown in jeans and a button-shirt, which is a trick since the weather has been calm for days.

"Mom." He hugs her. "Make yourself at home. I was just going out for a run."

Her eyebrows climb, high enough that her graying curls hide them. "A run? Outdoors?"

He feels his neck heat up, but nods. "I'm evolving," he says.

"John Reginald Kennex, you have a treadmill and two other machines inside this house because you don't like the way the humidity off the bay makes you drown in your own sweat. If you've evolved that much, I'll transfer every credit off my bitcoin stick to yours, right this second."

It's his turn to be surprised. John was born the year before the Great Recessive Slide, and she's not a fan of the banking systems. That's not small potatoes she's betting. Still. "I won't be long. You forgot your toys from when you stayed over, before."

She looks toward the box, then her gaze lifts to his displays. There's a full-body holo of Dorian, still in the anti-static suit that carries his unit number, and headlines she can probably read from where they're standing. "Yeah," she says. "All right."

When he comes back an hour later, he's dripping in sweat and annoyed as shit when his own house makes him wait at the door before it lets him in. *Bitch*, he thinks. He might be thinking it at the

house, but he might be thinking it at his mother, who has clearly upped the security in reaction to his unspoken request for her opinion.

She's deeply engrossed, and the data streams too fast for him to read. Does she have intake implants? Or is he slowing down that much?

He passes by without comment and takes a shower. When he comes out, all but one display is dark and she's standing at the window, staring out across the bay. She used to have a desk there, used to do most of her work from that very location until John's dad died. Then she started working more at the office, and when she finally decided to move, she'd given him the house.

"You're asking me if he's sentient," she says.

John isn't, really. He doesn't know what he's asking. "Okay."

"Artificial Intelligence has come a long way, John. I'd say that many synthetics are legitimate life forms, these days."

"They don't like being called synthetic."

She turns her head to stare. "'They' don't?"

He shrugs. "Dorian doesn't."

"All right. Your android may be sentient, but you're asking the wrong question. Sentience doesn't imply personhood. If it did, we'd still have whales in the ocean and gorillas in the wild. Sentience doesn't mean shit, if someone decides to turn him off."

John feels his jaw clench so tight, the muscles ache. She sees it, and turns back toward the water, so he says, "They can't turn him off as long as I'm partnered with him."

"You hope. But if he's sentient, he can feel trapped, right? *People*," she emphasizes the word, "resent obligation."

He sighs. Dorian's not that human, then, because Dorian's just happy to get to be a cop.

"What about after?" she asks. "Your watch could end on shift, like your father's did." That's the problem between them, he knows, the source of all this distance that didn't used to be there.

"If that happens, I won't be around to worry about it."

She watches him, and he can see deep thought in her eyes. "Nigel Vaughn really was a genius."

John makes a scoffing noise. He wasn't that much of a genius, not if he didn't realize he was making bots people would reject.

She purses her lips. It's a subtle judgment, a lot like the way Dorian judges him. "Retirement will force you out, eventually," she says. "Your DRN is considered obsolete in terms of his processing power today. They'll deactivate him when you retire."

He can't think that far ahead. "Mom, I'm still trying to figure if right now qualifies me as crazy."

She turns around, leans her shoulders against the plex and looks back toward his desk and the single holo of Dorian that remains on display. "He's pretty," she says, and smiles. "Remember when I told you they'd be pretty?"

He grimaces, nods.

"Vaughn had a mission, John," she says, and pushes away from the window. She veers toward him to plant a kiss on his cheek, then picks up the box of robotics parts. "He wanted to improve on people. That doesn't typically go well for people. I don't expect it to go well for you."

"Gee," he says, feeling the fear coil in his gut, "thanks." She doesn't know how deep he's in, or she'd be kinder about all this.

He watches her shoulders shrug as she walks to the door. "I was always the pragmatist, John. Your father was the dreamer."

John smiles. "Yeah, he was."

Her smile is softer, sadder, when she turns at the door. "Just remember where that landed him."

His father is dead, killed on the job. His mother holds back, waiting for John to die the same way. All his dad had was the job, in the end. And for him, it was enough.

For John? John's got a partner who cares as much as he does, who's attractive, and flirtatious, and way smarter than him. Who's an *android*.

John is screwed.

~ ~ ~

The day starts out so well. Yesterday he found an old coffee warmer in a junk store and figured out how to use it to taunt Dorian for being an android.

In the car, he sets up the gag and when Dorian asks, "What am I doing here?" John says, "You're heatin' my coffee!"

Dorian laughs. John is happy until Dorian sticks his finger in John's cup while lecturing him about temperature and paying attention to details. John has seen that finger stuck in terminal ports, dragged along corpses and gunshot residue and potential drug evidence to analyze its contents, and touching far too many strangers, and he realizes he has no idea what the sanitation habits are for police DRNs. But Dorian always smells okay, like freshly cleaned upholstery.

"You know how I like my coffee." He believes it, because Dorian's an android. Dorian can't *ignore* data.

"Yes," he says. "I, unlike you, pay attention to details—like what time it is, and what time you're supposed to pick up your partner for shift." He sounds annoyed, but it's all for show. He's playing, and John knows it.

"Oh, I pay attention to details," John says, because he can fake human annoyance better than an android can, "like you just put your finger in my coffee."

"If you like, I could put it somewhere else," Dorian says. It isn't quite the flirty voice, but John can't think of any other way to interpret that colloquialism so he changes the subject. Dorian calls him out on some other crap.

John is saved by the dispatch report of a possible homicide.

It's definitely homicide. The security guard's blood has soaked his cheap desk chair and congealed on the wall behind it. Dorian tags the last of the security feed and shows John five guys who entered the lobby and three who exited a stairwell at the twenty-fifth floor before the system went dark. With the elevators locked down, John starts climbing. They don't make four floors before an explosion shakes the building, and he follows Dorian back through a rush of panicked civilians, down to balcony over a hole where the lobby used to be. Something blew through the quick-crete, took out the floor and the server rooms and whoever might have been standing in the lobby—Harrison. One uniform's name was Harrison. He thinks the other's was Peck.

"Lightbomb," Dorian says, as if John wouldn't know. He's seen what they can do. "The building remains structurally sound," Dorian talks on, "but there's damage to the third and fourth emergency exits. The southeast stairwell is also blocked." He looks at John. "We'll need to clear the building."

John nods, but he knows the android's thinking about clearing it of civilians. John's thinking about

clearing it of the people who set off that bomb and killed innocent people.

Maldonado calls, and it doesn't take long for her to tell him to fall back. He argues as he climbs. Her order to clear the building doesn't leave room for misinterpretation: "Leave. The building. Now." He talks in static, ends with "Christmas" and hangs up the phone.

He worries for a second that Dorian's going to make it a problem, but Dorian says, "I just love the way you wear your insubordination like it's a virtue." His smile is blinding.

John figures out he got suckered, though, when they reach the fifth floor and Dorian says, "At least we can make sure the civilians evacuate safely."

It needs to be done and John knows it. Whatever the three guys on twenty-five are doing, any number of others are unaccounted for. It would be crazy to walk right past one of them and leave themselves vulnerable from behind. Still, he frowns and says, "Next time, I'm leaving you in the car."

Dorian comes up with a plan to use the air vents, once they reach the twenty-third floor, to get to the twenty-fifth floor unseen, and John's feeling pretty good about the whole thing until Dorian intercepts a civilian's call and she tells him the perps just killed a hostage.

Negotiations have begun. Paige's phone allows him to hear the suspects' side of things.

She is frantic about her sister, and she says one of those things some women say that he'll never understand. "This is all my fault. She wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me." John looks back at Dorian and rolls his eyes. Armed gunmen taking the floor isn't her fault. It's the armed gunmen's fault.

He doesn't have time for this. "Paige, can you tell me how many gunmen there are?"

He gets a number, but he's losing her, he can tell. He tries to win her back, tells her about the time he fell through a frozen lake.

Dorian, behind him again, whispers, "Are you trying to put her to sleep?"

John glares at him as he finishes the story. "I felt like everything was gonna be okay, because I wasn't alone," he finishes. "Paige, you're not alone. I'm with you. Everything is gonna be okay. You believe me?"

"I do," she says. He's got her back.

They clear the fourteenth floor and keep climbing. "You know," Dorian says, "everyone trips on

stairs and it's calculated to occur one in every two thousand, two hundred and twenty-two occasions."

"That's very interesting," John says, hoping his tone says how much it isn't. John knows Dorian is amusing himself, but still. They've got nine more floors to clear before they get to the air ducts, and his bum leg aches at the socket connection.

"You know what would be interesting, John?" Dorian asks. "If you told me that ice fishing story again—"

Gunfire shuts Dorian up, at least. It also doubles John's heart rate. Maybe it's the sprint up the stairs, but they find two of the gang on fifteen. John empties a clip to stop one, but all he finds is a blood trail. More rapid fire in the distance ends with two familiar, efficiently spaced police-issue thirteen-mm rounds and John almost doesn't say, "Dorian. You okay?"

"John," Dorian says. "Get over here."

He does, glad to see a corpse in front of Dorian, a little unsettled to see a hole blown through Dorian's temple.

"Floor's clear," Dorian says.

"You okay?" John asks and, because Dorian doesn't seem to have noticed, adds, "You took one in the head."

"Yeah. Ricochet."

If Dorian can ignore it, John can too. "Whatcha got?" he asks. Dorian's puzzling over something small in his hand.

"I'm not sure," Dorian says, "but there's writing on it. Start."

"Start."

"Start," Dorian repeats.

John sighs. Maybe Dorian is damaged and doesn't know it. Within a minute, that turns out to be not quite true. Lights flash in the wrong places, like low-voltage electricity short-circuiting over the bullet wound. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"My dynamic voltage scaling has been damaged by the bullet."

Dorian is speaking with special care, which can't be good. "You want to say that a little less complicated?"

"I won't be able to walk in five minutes."

Shit.

In less than two minutes, Dorian is paralyzed and propped against a cubicle wall, but the rest of him still works. He identifies the signals of seven face-maker masks in the building while John looks for tools he can substitute for what Dorian told him was needed to make field repairs. “Tenotomy scissors” will be nail clippers. John looks for “a fine tool with a sharp point like a diamond-tip engraving pen,” spots a used cotton swab in the trash.

“All right,” he says, and kneels down. “Let’s try and fix you.” Up close, Dorian’s insides look like spaghetti with purple glue poured over them. John likes the outside better.

“How’s it look?” Dorian asks. He seems worried.

“Yeah, it’s uh, totally fine,” John lies. “You can hardly see it.”

For a machine, Dorian is weirdly obsessed with hygiene. After getting a hell of an electric shock and a brief argument about shades of color, John accidentally shuts down his robot.

He doesn’t know whether to try and fix Dorian, or leave him and go on up to the twenty-fifth floor alone, but without Dorian he also doesn’t know where the access panel to the air ducts are, or how to navigate them if he finds his way in. Now that electricity isn’t sparking across everything, maybe he can see a difference between lavender and magenta. He cuts the right fascicle (tendon; Dorian thinks he’s a moron), envisions this one square inch of Dorian as simple circuitry since it’s not under his tactical armor, and thinks he should lodge a complaint with the manufacturer. Maybe they fixed this exposure in later models.

Paige asks him if he’s there. He forgot about her under the dual pressures of gunfire and damaged partner. So much for not leaving her alone. “I can hear you, Paige,” he says, as if he’s been listening all along. He gets the bundle in Dorian’s head back into alignment while he humors her. There’s old chewing gum in the trash can. He picks it up, thinks, *Dorian had better appreciate this.*

He tries not to think about where this gum has been as he chews. Paige wants to talk, which he hates, but understands. He lets her talk him into sharing his middle name, glad that Dorian is out. “You’d better not tell anyone, okay?” he says. “Police orders.” He pulls the softened gum out of his mouth, resists the urge to spit. “It’s Reginald. My dad was a big Elton John fan.” He should be able to get the gum to hold the fascicles in place, and get the dermal layer to hold the gum in place. He pokes at Dorian’s head, says more meaningless shit to Paige.

Dorian jerks awake and spastically sucks in air. John asks, “You okay?”

“Huh?” Paige says.

John grits his teeth. She just heard him say the sincerest thing he’s said today, and he said it to his robot.

Dorian touches his head, makes a face. John resists the urge to push his hand away. “Gross,” Dorian says. His feet move and he adds, “But good.”

John has no idea how long chewing gum will hold, but Dorian stands up when Paige says the bad guys know they’re in the building. The guy John shot who got away must have made it back to the fold, and now the stairwell is under guard.

Dorian is now committed to clearing every floor. “The more people we take out before we get to the twenty-fifth,” he says, “the fewer we’ll have to deal with when hostages are in the mix.”

“We can’t—”

“It’s your fault,” Dorian interrupts. “Before you messed with my head, I could tell where they were from the signals those face-makers were broadcasting.”

John wants to rush up anyway. “Yeah? *I* think it’s *your* fault,” he replies as he lets Dorian lead him onto sixteen for a quick sweep, “because *you* let yourself get shot.”

Dorian smirks. John winces, worried the facial expressions will dislodge the gum.

They clear sixteen and seventeen. John still doesn’t know what floor the sentries are on, and he still hasn’t devised a plan to get past them. That’s when Paige loses faith. “I’m going out there,” she says. “I can’t leave Jenna alone.”

“Paige, that’s a bad idea. We’re a few floors away.” He’s been telling her they’re close for half an hour.

“I have to,” she says. “If we’re going to die, I want to be with her.” It’s hard to make out the words, her voice is so choked with emotion. “She’s my sister.”

He hopes that Dorian has a lifeline to throw here, but Dorian just looks up at him. Dorian usually moves fluidly. Aesthetically. At the very least, his movements are efficient. Now they look effortful, jerky. That can’t be good.

“Paige, just stay where you are,” he says, urgent now.

"I'll leave my phone open," she blubbers. "You'll be able to hear what's going on."

"Paige, it's too risky. Listen to me. Just stay put. Paige. Please, just listen to me." She doesn't answer. "Paige. Paige, are you there? Paige!"

Dorian touches his chest and mutes the mic. "John. If you keep yelling into the phone, you'll put her in greater danger and reveal the fact that we have an open line to them."

John curses. "We're skipping eighteen."

Dorian shakes his head. "No, we're not."

They sweep it fast and make it to the nineteenth floor, where they hear the gunmen talk about "the other crew." It takes a minute, but with the help of Dorian's files, John gets it. "It's a heist." He's still trying to figure out how to get up to the twenty-fifth floor and stop them when he hears a sound he hopes he doesn't recognize. "What's that beeping?" he asks.

The careful way Dorian says "John," tells him he's right. "They've activated a lightbomb."

John's gut knots up, like it does when his body knows that there's nothing he can do but his brain rejects that knowledge outright. "They're going to kill the hostages," he says. He and Dorian are only four floors away, and these perps are meticulous. That lightbomb timer will have minutes on it, time for them to get away. He'd bet his life on that, and he's about to.

Dorian says, "What are you doing?" in the nervous, *How do I stop him?* voice.

"Sticking to the plan," John says. "We're going up."

"John, they know we're here, they're expecting us to come up the stairs. You won't make it to the twenty-fifth floor alive."

He turns on Dorian by the elevators. He can't stand here and do nothing while those people upstairs die. "You heard him. We don't have a choice."

Dorian stares, somber and unblinking. "I don't have a choice."

It's the last thing John expected Dorian to say.

Dorian turns toward an elevator and pries the doors open. "People's lives are in jeopardy."

The pivot from talking Dorian into a hail Mary run up the stairs to talking Dorian into slowing down to think this through gives John whiplash. "Dorian, you've been shot. Your head's full of bubble gum. You can't do this alone."

"I have to," Dorian says.

John knows he means it, and that talking won't change anything. Then John remembers that he's the guy who wanted to rush up there in the first place, and he pivots again. "Then I'm coming with you."

"You can't," Dorian says. He looks unhappy about it. "I'm designed to do this, John." Dorian must watch a lot of entertainment or surveillance video, because the way he grips John's elbow, brief and firm, is a fucking stereotype for the comforting goodbye. Then Dorian jumps out over two hundred feet of empty elevator shaft and grabs the steel cables.

Fine, maybe Dorian was designed to do this. But John's father was a cop, and his grandmother was a cop. John was designed to do this, too. *Think.* He has to get past the sentries. How can he—the corpse on fifteen still has his face-maker, and John can use it to walk right in. John's synthetic leg better damned well cooperate with him today.

It does, down seven flights and then back up thirteen. He hears the mayhem as he runs, pushing off with the synthetic leg to take three, four stairs at a time. Whoever was watching the stairwell has abandoned their post, probably in response to all the gunfire inside. John worries he wasted too much time, but once he's on twenty-five he walks right up to the two guys who have guns pointed at Dorian's head.

"Nice of you to show up, Greggor," one of them says.

John is within his legal rights to end them, and he does. Probably, it shouldn't feel so good.

Dorian is crawling to the lightbomb, so John dives for the dedicated police comm. "Maldonado!" he yells. "The hostages are secure. The whole thing is a palladium heist. Shut it off, now. They got us to block the alarm system. Turn the jammer off!"

He hears her give the order, sees every collected comm device activate. All that's left now is the lightbomb, and Dorian pulls the igniter before the timer runs out. John gets to breathe again. Dorian didn't make a liar out of him; the hostages, wherever they scattered, will survive. So will John.

Dorian's eyes haven't left his. The rush is heady.

Mop-up is a nightmare. Of the seven people who took over the building, three of the kills are John's and the rest are Dorian's. Dorian's will clear without incident, John knows, because John saw the spray pattern on the walls near the ceiling, and knew exactly what Dorian had done: aimed

high to distract the gunmen and draw fire away from the hostages, and picked the assholes off carefully, one by one.

John has some choice words about using less care and staying alive to pick off more assholes in the future; the image of Dorian, unmoving on the floor with guns pointed at his damaged head, is stuck in John's brain like the after-image of a flare.

Dorian caught more rounds than John can count. One arm is twitchy and he isn't so steady on his legs. John can't believe that the chewing gum held.

Android Tech arrives on scene with a dolly, so John guesses the elevators are working again. "Where are you taking Dorian?" he asks.

"Field repair," the guy from A.T. says. "We brought the truck."

"Okay. I'll be down in a minute to pick him up."

It's dark when John gets outside. After he signs off on his preliminary statement he looks for Dorian, who leans at the back of a vehicle, watching him while the A.T. guy pulls gum out of his head wound. John holds the gaze, wondering how dumb he'll feel if he walks over.

A.T. won't let Dorian go, something about having to lower the power feed on his body. The guy says, "I'll take him to the lab."

"Take him to the station," John says. "I need him before he's checked in." John doesn't, but he won't let them cart Dorian away like he's equipment.

The A.T. guy shrugs. "Whatever."

So John follows the van and collects Dorian in the parking lot. Dorian's steadier now, but he still has a limp. "He can't answer any calls," the A.T. guy says. "He's an anchor until we clear him."

John wants to punch the guy. He lets the urge pass and gathers up Dorian with a look.

"What are we doing, John?" Dorian asks.

John doesn't know. "Checking in," he lies as they head toward the bullpen.

"Rudy's going to want to repair me immediately," Dorian says.

"He should," John says. "You're beat to Hell and back."

Dorian frowns, gets an anxious look like a scared puppy. "He'll hover. He'll..." Dorian sighs. "I'm not ready for that, yet."

They round the corner and people start clapping, which is ridiculous. John's neck heats up and Dorian looks confused.

John finds out that the man who was about to end Dorian was Gerald Layton, who had no redeeming qualities as far as John can see. John has no plans to feel remorse.

Rudy walks in pissed. It's not a good look for him. "Chewing gum? Would you use chewing gum to fix a race car?"

John shrugs. "Yeah, if it was busted and I needed to win a race." He'd use chewing gum to fix his own head if he could, and he needed to finish a job.

Rudy looks speechless, and John is hopeful, but no. "He'll need extensive diagnostics," Rudy says.

John gets it, now, gets that what Dorian doesn't want is the fussing, the overzealous intrusion that is Rudy's stock in trade. Dorian's processing something, and Rudy's—energy, or whatever—is going to mess with that.

"That can wait," he says, brushing Rudy off. He taps Dorian's chest with the back of his hand. It's too warm. Something is overheating in there. "Come on," he says, "let's go get some noodles."

"You are aware that I don't eat," Dorian says.

"Perfect," John says. "I'm buying. Let's roll." In the car, Dorian treats him by turning on the car's emergency lights. "Lights? For noodles?" he asks, and points at the roof. "How are you gonna explain that?"

"I have my ways," Dorian says. He's not smiling, though. John treats Dorian by driving under the speed limit.

It doesn't take long for Dorian to start talking. "Thank you, for what you did back there."

"Don't mention it," John says. He tries to lighten the mood. "Besides, no one messes with my coffee warmer."

That raises a smile, and John thinks maybe the worst is over. But John's smile hasn't faded before Dorian says, "Hey John, you remember that story you told Paige? You fell through the ice as a kid. When that gun was pointed at my head, I felt something similar. And I didn't want to die."

John feels it, the wide-open emptiness in his chest, the certainty that he's lost a battle with himself.

"I know it's not the same, with me," Dorian says, "but..."

“Hey,” John cuts him off, “dead is dead.” Because Dorian’s alive. John didn’t chase after an android because of ego. John chased after him because it wasn’t okay that Dorian was going in alone, without backup. Dorian is *alive*.

“Yeah,” Dorian says, and John hears the pondering-quiet for a second. “I suppose so.”

John has been more honest than he wanted to be, but Dorian still looks—John doesn’t know. It’s not the equilibrium that he’s used to, that he needs. “Why don’t you chuck some music on?” he asks, to distract either or both of them.

Dorian, damn him, plays Elton John and calls him Reggie. John isn’t sure what he’s being punished for. Maybe Dorian really does like to sing.

When the song is over, John offers. “I’ll take you to the lab.”

Dorian looks over. His head lolls against the seat rest. “What about the noodles?”

John waves a hand. “You know when I said you looked totally fine? That I could hardly see the damage?”

Dorian nods, jerky. “Yeah.”

“I lied then. You look like shit.”

Dorian smiles.

It’s very late. John has eaten noodles, dropped Dorian at Rudy’s lab, ignored Rudy’s lecture, gone home, gone to bed, stared at the ceiling, and finally given up. He stands by the window, flimsy in hand, staring sightless at the lights on the bay as the gravity of his situation sinks in.

Less than three months. Dorian has taken dozens of bullets, come too close to five explosions, been nearly torn apart by a refurbished black-market loading bot, and lost an ear to me trying to get my memory back.

He told me he has free will, but today he proved he doesn’t.

Once he heard that lightbomb timer engage, he was going up to the twenty-fifth floor. Period. He said he had to do this. To do what, exactly? Throw himself on the grenade?

I was ready to go up the stairwell knowing that guys with big guns would rain fire down on me, though. I had to do that.

We’re the same, him and me. It doesn’t matter much if he was made of silicon and carbon and

graphite-based lubricants instead of calcium and trace minerals and water.

Now I’ve seen it, watched him jump into an elevator shaft and shimmy up steel cables like a bot. But the synthetic isn’t relevant. Now he’s just a guy who’s in my profession, more dedicated to the job than he is to anything else, and if that’s programming, so be it. Now he’s a guy with soulful eyes, of average height, who’s smart. Smarter than me.

I am screwed.

Inviting him out for noodles. What the fuck is that? I should have left him at the station so Rudy could run the diagnostics, fix whatever I broke in his head and patch up all the holes that did enough damage to make him limp out to the car. His left hand was so messed up, he couldn’t grip the handle to open the door.

But leaving him with Rudy, that would have taken away what little choice he has. It would have acknowledged that he’s police property without the right to make any decisions at all. And I knew, machine or not, that he wanted to talk.

So I took him to the car with me, and I let him talk. Then I came home, showered off the sweat of running up and down what felt like a hundred flights of stairs and mopping up and vidding my preliminary report, and took off my leg. I put my hand on the socket, like Dorian keeps telling me to do, and just sat there feeling it. Acclimating, he says.

Then I ordered the lights out and jerked off thinking about my robot partner.

I’m going to develop a fetish for wrists and feet because that’s the only skin I’ve seen, and I don’t even want to think about what a police-model android does or doesn’t have.

I am really screwed.

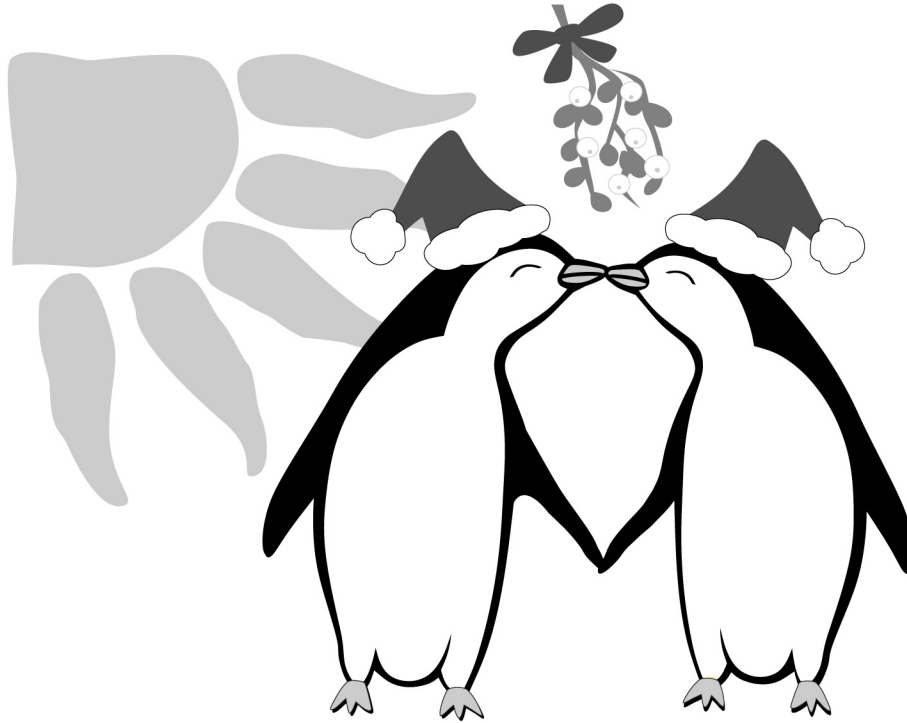
Lock. Kennex, John. January 14, 2007

~ ~ ~

Three days later, he introduces Dorian as his partner and that’s the case where Dorian starts calling John his friend. Now Dorian knows John’s screwed, too.

It’s only a matter of time.





The 12 (and more) years of Escapade by Anonymous

Editor's Notes

While it is only one filk, it is extremely long. ☺ The anonymous contributor assures us that, with few liberties, the events for any given year actually relate to that particular year. For example, Escapade 7 really *was* the con at which the *Comes a Horseman* episode of *Highlander* appeared and, uhm, created all those Methos-come-latelies.

The 12 (and more) years of Escapade

by Anonymous

Author's Notes

To be sung, erratically, to the tune of "Twelve Days of Christmas"

The **first** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Slash fandom on a California beach.

~ ~ ~

The **second** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Two naked strippers we embarrassed on a California beach.

~ ~ ~

The **third** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Three Star Trek series, two cop-show pairings, and a Wiseguy and his handler on the beach.

~ ~ ~

The **fifth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyyy!*
Real-person slash, academic fans, what's a good sex scene,
and a really slashy vid show on the beach.

~ ~ ~

The **seventh** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Sentinels a-hearing, spacers pioneering,
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyyy!*
Four HL Horsemen, Oh Tee Threes, Garak and Bashir, and cross-species slashy sex upon the beach.

~ ~ ~

The **eighth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Mounties in Chicago; Tara and Willow; Xena, the Warrior;
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyyy!*
Slash as "women's porn," zine re-views, profic versus slash, and the Age of Sail had landed on the beach.

~ ~ ~

The **tenth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Hard Core Logo rocking, Sports Night a-talking, Jedis surviving, vampires reviving,
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyyy!*
Harry Potter chan, RPS, BDSM, and a Monolith: "My God, it's full of slash."

~ ~ ~

The **thirteenth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
...Stargates in heaven, Ocean's Eleven, sparkly boys a-dancing, Elves and men romancing,
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyy!*
Clark and Lex in love, kinks and squicks, gender roles in fic, and Magnif'cent Seven slash upon the beach.

~ ~ ~

The **fifteenth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
...Firefly a-fleein', pirates Caribbean, AUs fantastic, Dr. House sarcastic,
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyy!*
Noncon and rape, paired soulmates, BNFs, and Brokeback Mountain cowboys on... the beach?

~ ~ ~

The **twentieth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
...Star Trek rebooting, Leverage a-looting, Burn Notice spying, Iron Man a-flying,
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyy!*
Fandom and race, new Sherlock, Supernatural, and Jack Harkness lighting Torchwood on the beach.

~ ~ ~

...The **twenty-fourth** year, the Escapade Convention gave to me:
Teen Wolf a-howling, Sleepy Hollow rising, strong and silent heroes, Hawkeye and Phil Coulson,
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyy!*
Lost Girl succubus, Orphan Black, Almost Human cops, and we're old enough for cocktails on the beach.

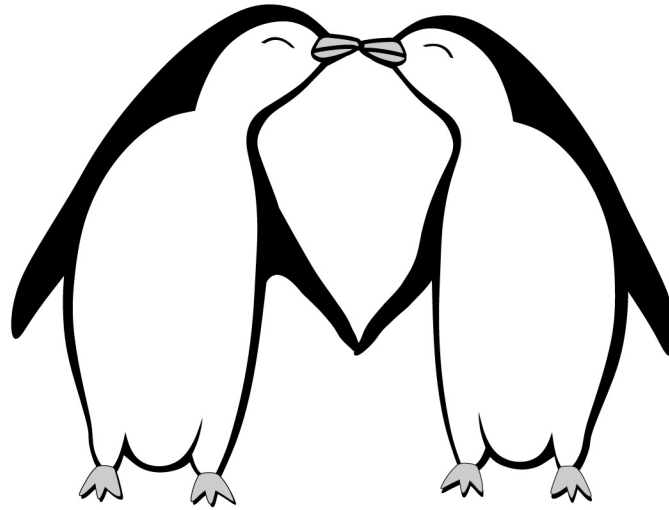
~ ~ ~

In **future** years, the Escapade Convention brings to me:
...Seeing fan friends live; slashy parties thrive; heroes, endearing; more shows premiering;
Con-tro-ver-seeyyyyy!*
Reboots everywhere, M C U, more Star Trek**, and never-ending fandom near the beach!

**Really, it's "controversial panels," but "controversy" scans better. ☺*

***and Star Wars and buddy cops and m/m and f/f and cowboys and sidekicks and reboots and...*





Under The Stairs

by Dovy Blacque

Editor's Notes

The *Sentinal* series ended with a public humiliation that ended both Blair's career and Jim and Blair's professional partnership. "Where do they go from there?" isn't an easy question to answer for either of them.

Under The Stairs

by Dovyia Blacque

It never occurred to either of them that continuing to live at Jim's loft as they'd been doing for four years might no longer be either necessary or desirable. That is, that it might appear odd from the outside. Rumors had been flying about them since Blair first showed up as some wild-haired no one who managed to save all of Major Crime nearly by himself. Of course Jim had heard the rumors immediately; what didn't he hear? But it had taken a few months of being Jim's shadow for the murmurings to catch up to Blair. When they did, he felt his cheeks heat at the graphic suppositions of the ones doing the gossiping. Then it struck him that, if he was stumbling over this stuff, Jim must have been aware of it from the very start. That brought his heart up into his throat and dread to his stomach. He had to return to Jim's desk from Records where he'd been sent on an errand, knowing Jim knew what he'd just learned.

But Jim had just been... Jim when Blair sat down again in Major Crime, flopping the file folders he'd been sent for onto the top of the paperwork Jim was sorting through.

The roll of those beautiful blue eyes and the tilt of that gorgeous head made Blair grin and shrug which caused Jim to sigh and pick up the folders for his consideration.

And he'd forgotten about what he'd heard in the rush and madness that came with the case they were working. A week later, it was as if the rumors had never been heard and Blair's life continued on undisturbed by other people's concerns about them.

~ ~ ~

It was difficult pretending nothing had changed once the dissertation fiasco split Blair's world apart. Because, once the dust settled, once he

and Jim had actually talked about everything that happened and he'd made himself understood about not accepting Jim and Simon's offer to join the PD, it was pretty clear that everything had changed, everything was different. They were under a different, more intense, spotlight than ever before. More than Jim's police work making him stand out in the community. More than Blair's spectacularly brave and idiotic self-immolation on TV. More than the crucible that was the fight Blair brought to Sid Graham's door about publishing his thesis without permission. The threat of a civil lawsuit against Graham had forced him to offer a settlement that Blair reluctantly accepted; he'd been fired up, ready for his day in court. But, between Jim and Simon, he'd been talked down, foregoing the satisfaction of publicly humiliating Graham in favor of putting his life back together. Or, perhaps it was a combination of all those things that made Blair more aware of every little thing he and Jim did outside the loft. Was he walking too close to the Sentinel? Was he touching him too much when people were looking? Were their heads together too much when they met for lunch every day? Was it odd that they **did** meet for lunch every day?

It was impossible for Blair to return to working with Jim at the station. Anything Blair touched was brought into question, every case he'd helped on, every piece of evidence or theory he'd had over the four years he'd worked with Jim. Suspect; everything about him now was suspect. He knew all of that but the reality of it wore at him, tore at his heart and his mind, leaving him floating without a goal for the first time in his life.

So he took care of the loft. He cleaned – Ellison approved – and shopped and made Jim breakfast and dinner. And when Jim didn't make it home for dinner, Blair put a plate together for him in the 'fridge so Jim could just nuke it and not have to settle for something quick with empty calories

after a tough day. In other words, Blair became a house husband but without any fringe benefits. And when he realized he liked the idea of reaping those benefits, that's when he started to question his continuing to live with Jim as they'd been doing.

If it had appeared that they were more than friends for the past four years then it had to look like it even more after Blair had told the world that he'd betrayed Jim. Because, if he'd been such an asshole, why was Jim allowing him to stay? Answer: Blair was Jim's lover. Obviously.

Obviously.

Shit.

~ ~ ~

The idea came to him in a dream, in one of the most pleasant dreams he's ever had. There was a view of the ocean – though the ocean was an odd shade of purple, probably input from watching Dr. Who – and a complicated network of stairways that really made no sense but which were somehow functional. There were no ceilings but the rain that fell from a cloudless, blue sky wasn't getting in the house. Dreams. Sometimes they made no sense but, sometimes, even when they made no sense the core message came through.

It was, literally, a dream house but Blair knew it wasn't meant to be taken literally. The house was the message, not the particulars thereof.

The concept sat in the back of his mind, popping to the forefront every so often over the next few weeks. And it seemed somehow telling that he didn't remember any other dreams since. It was a message from his subconscious and he wanted to let it steep, let it become more a part of the actual world before he pulled it up from his organic hard drive and really took a look at the possibilities and particulars. He definitely didn't bring it up to Jim.

Jim. Stressed Jim. Unhappy Jim. Angry Jim. Silent Jim.

None of them strangers, all of them made Blair sad. So he cooked and he cleaned and he listened when Jim broke his silence to talk about a disturbing case and, occasionally to express his sense of solitude at work, his inability to force himself to like working without his Guide. He never blamed Blair, never complained that Blair should have accepted the badge. In fact, the opposite was true. Jim told him that he was relieved that Blair had decided against becoming a cop and he told Blair that on a regular basis. Jim also made a point of telling Blair that he missed the sharp mind and comforting presence he'd grown accustomed to at his side.

So, between letting the dream idea ferment and letting himself feel the pangs that were the result of his choosing against becoming Jim's official partner, Blair's mind was a busy place even if his body wasn't.

Seven weeks after Blair blew up his own life, a night just like every other night at the loft when Jim managed to get home on time, Blair pulled out one of his best meals and served it at the table, a table he'd taken pains to set pleasantly including a bottle of one of the few wines Jim liked. He used the good wine glasses and actual matching dishes. He had candles on the table and set strategically around the loft. And the scent of ossobuco was going to reach Jim even before he opened the door to the lobby of their building. By the time he made it through the front door of the loft, his expression spoke clearly of the potential for a full-out zone if Blair didn't take counter measures immediately.

Blair went to Jim, taking the big man's coat, removing the gun from his holster and securing it in the kitchen drawer. He patted Jim's chest to get his attention.

"You with me?" he asked as he took Jim's elbow and moved him toward the kitchen table.

"Huh?"

"Earth to Ellison," Blair said as he snapped his fingers near Jim's ear. "Yoohoo!"

Jim scowled down at his roommate. "I hear you," he assured even as his attention returned to the sumptuous scents emanating from the stove.

"Good. Don't want my best meal to be served to someone who's zoned out," he said pointedly and Jim rolled his eyes.

"Time for me to shower?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. Go ahead. You've got about fifteen minutes."

Jim nodded and moved toward the bathroom, obviously avoiding the stove with great effort.

Blair smiled as he returned to finishing the rice.

~ ~ ~

Exactly twelve minutes later, Jim emerged looking more relaxed and slightly damp around the edges. He was pulling on a t-shirt over his sweat pants even as he sat at the table, picking up the bottle of wine to read the label even though he had to have already read it from across the room.

"Pulling out all the stops here, Chief. Special occasion?"

Blair quickly glanced at him over his shoulder before returning his attention to making two plates. “Not really,” he said, then shrugged. “Maybe. Sorta.”

“Now you’ve got me worried,” Jim teased.

Blair came to the table, setting one heaping plate before his partner before settling to Jim’s left with his own plate.

“Pour the wine, huh?”

“Okay,” Jim said once he’d taken a bite of his meal. “What’s up?”

“Up?” Blair hedged.

“Yeah,” Jim said calmly though Blair heard a thread of stress in his voice. “Up. Like, what’s with the seduction?”

“This is not a seduction,” he assured Jim. “Though I acknowledge the possibilities for misreading the setting as such.”

Jim’s eyebrow rose at that before taking a sip of wine. “You’re hyped,” he said, looking at Blair. “Not overly hyped but hyped. You look... excited. Maybe it’s anticipation of whatever this whole wing-ding’s about. So, yeah. Seems like a seduction. Though you probably just want to soften me up for some nefarious Sandburgian reason.”

“That’s kinda harsh, man,” Blair complained around a small smile.

“Well, if this really was a seduction, there’d be music and, since there isn’t any – and I know how thorough you are when you’re seducing someone – I have come to the conclusion that you want something from me.”

“Suspicious much, Ellison?” Blair asked. “Can’t I just do something nice for you?”

“But,” Jim continued, “you’re too calm for this to be anything painful or debilitating for me. So go ahead. Ask. I can take it.”

Blair reached out and smacked Jim’s closest arm. “Now I’m going to leave you hanging; I’ve decided not to tell you what this was all about.”

Jim tilted his head as though to say: ‘Yeah. Right.’

Blair grinned at him. “Okay.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been thinking,” he began only to be interrupted by a choked sound from his friend. He chose to ignore Jim’s editorial comment. “It’s been a while since my week was up staying here after my warehouse went boom.”

“Only a little while,” Jim agreed with a smirk.

“Yeah, anyway,” Blair continued, “I’ve been thinking and, now that I have the money from Sid, I was wondering if we shouldn’t talk about moving.”

If it was possible for a grown man to lose ninety percent of his coloring in a second, Jim did just that. “You want to move?” he asked.

“Well, *want* is a strong word. But I have been living in a tiny room for the past four years and, while I think you’re a mensch for having me here and for carrying a lot of my monthly bills – and not charging much rent – I thought it could be possible that the situation might be wearing you down.”

Jim nodded slightly. “Okay, I can see where that might be getting to *you*.”

Blair gaped at him. “Did I say it was getting to me? No, no I did not. I said it might be getting to you.”

“With all that about a tiny room, you were talking about how it might be getting to me?”

Blair blinked at him. Jim might have taken this as Blair’s attempt not to roll his eyes. He might have been right.

“Jim. My friend. My buddy, my Sentinel. Why don’t we take a step out of the Ellison Zone and start from the beginning?”

“The Ellison Zone?” Jim asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” Blair interrupted whatever else Ellison was going to say on the subject. “Try listening to my words. One at a time if you have to.”

Jim flipped him off.

“Mature, man. Okay. What I said was that I thought having me living in a tiny room in your not so large loft might be getting to you after four years and I thought we should talk about moving.”

“Now that you’re rich,” Jim added, sitting back in his chair and meeting Blair’s gaze. “You’re serious.”

“Well, I’m seriously rich, yes, though I have to repeat that it’s weird and a little unnerving to be rich.”

Jim gave him a quelling look.

“Yes, Jim. I am serious about moving.”

“You know,” Jim said, “you haven’t really talked about what you’re going to do now that you’re rich and don’t have your doctorate. Yet.”

Blair sighed and leaned back in his chair, arms flopping into his lap from where they'd been resting on the table. "Jim. I can't go into this 'You don't have your doctorate, *yet*' fantasy you insist isn't fantasy. Not now, anyway. And I haven't thought about what I'm going to do now that I'm rich any more than I'd thought about it before I was rich. And could we stop calling me 'rich'?"

"Well-to-do?" Jim suggested but Blair just repeated his quelling look. "Sorry," Jim said. "But it's something I worry about, you know? I worry about you, being all domestic and non-scholarly and all."

"I'm still a scholar. I'll always be that. But, yeah, I've enjoyed the house husband thing."

"And that's what has me worried," Jim said with a slight grin.

"Can we get back to the moving thing?"

"Do we have to, Chief? I mean, what's wrong with how things are?"

"So you're not tired of having a grown man living under your stairs?" Blair asked.

"Not if that grown man is you, no. I might object if it was Sneaks or H, but you? No, not tired of that at all. How about you? Are you tired of being the grown man under my stairs?"

Blair laughed. "Man, this is a weird conversation."

"Sandburg Zone," Jim informed him. "I've gotten used to it. To you. Under my stairs."

"To be honest, Jim, I have to admit to feeling a little cramped. Under your stairs."

"So, the moving thing," Jim said. "I see."

"Yeah. So I was thinking we could discuss it."

"Isn't that what we're doing?"

"I think we're running circles around the subject so, no, I don't think we're actually discussing the possibility."

"What's to discuss?" Jim asked. "You're tired of living here. I get that."

"Well, I assumed you'd want a say in the matter."

"And, since you're tired, do what you need to do," Jim continued, obviously not registering Blair's words. "Let me know what I can do to help." He rose with their empty dinner plates and took them to the sink, turning on the water as though that could silence anything Blair had to say.

"Jim," Blair said, moving to lean against the kitchen counter at Jim's side. He put a hand on Jim's left shoulder and pushed, turning the larger man toward him. "Put the dishes down and move away from the sink," he instructed. "It's not going to kill you to talk about this."

Jim sighed but let Blair lead him into the living room. He sat when Blair indicated he do so and watched as Blair sat next to him, not quite an arm's width between them.

"So, what do we need to discuss exactly?" Jim asked.

"Where to go, for one thing," Blair began. "How much to spend, for another..."

"Look, Chief, a good Real Estate agent can help you with all that and I'm sure Stephen wouldn't mind giving you more financial advice..."

"Jim!" Blair interrupted, grabbing the other man's nearest hand. "Would you listen to me, please?"

"I am listening to you," Jim asserted, sounding like he was about to get angry.

"No, you're not," Blair said with a short laugh. "You're not," he repeated. "Look at me," he insisted and when Jim refused to meet his eyes, Blair put his hand on Jim's chin and moved his head until their eyes met. "I'm not talking about me moving," he said slowly. "I'm talking about *us* moving."

Jim's eyes narrowed, then widened and his mouth opened as though to protest but closed again as understanding finally dawned. "You want us to move? Together?"

"If you want," Blair said. "Only if you want, man. But, as far as I'm concerned, I don't want to move on my own. Hell, I don't want to live on my own. Not now. Not for the foreseeable future."

Jim's head tilted in that way it did when he was listening to something far off in the distance that no one else could hear.

"What?" Blair asked. "Now's the time to ask. Anything."

"What about..." Jim shifted, only then realizing Blair was holding his hand. "Um, what about when you meet someone you want to start a life with? Seems pointless for us to move together if I'm just going to have to move again."

Blair shook the hair out of his face with some exasperation. "Why would that happen? I mean, why would it happen after we move if it hasn't already happened?"

"You haven't met Ms. Right?" Jim asked.

“Am I looking for Ms. Right?” Blair asked right back. “Are you? Have either of us even dated in the past six months?”

Jim looked away for a moment, apparently considering the question. When he met Blair’s gaze again, there was a self-deprecating tilt to his mouth.

“See?” Blair asked, feeling his throat try to close on him as the words he’d been running through his head tried to choke him. It was do or die time and he heard himself say, “No dating. Could it be, could it just maybe, possibly be that we’ve both already met the right person to spend the rest of our lives with? And, by that, I mean Mr. Right. You know, each other?”

“Something you want to tell me, Chief?”

“I think I just did tell you, Jim.”

“Okay,” Jim said slowly, nodding in understanding.

“And don’t tell me you’ve never thought about me that way because I know you have.”

“How would you know that?”

“I just do. I know these things.”

Jim laughed. “Didn’t know you’d gone psychic on me, Sandburg.”

“Not psychic, but you know, Shaman, all that mystical stuff you hate to talk about? Yeah? Well, that’s how I know. Besides,” he quickly added, “I know when someone’s moved past tolerance for me and moved on into liking me and so on.”

“And so on? We’re friends, best friends. Of course I like you.”

“You kinda love me,” Blair told him, nudging his shoulder against the larger man’s arm.

Ellison nudged back. “You’re kinda sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“That’s a surprise? No, it’s not, and you know it. Could we maybe skip all the melodrama and move on to talking about where we want to move?”

“I think you just called me a drama queen, Chief. Them’s fighting words.”

“Hey, if the tiara fits, man.”

Jim let it go. “Well,” he said, “if what you’re suggesting none-too-subtly is that you and I are going to move on to a more... what?... physical relationship?” At Blair’s nod, he continued, “Why would we need a bigger place if, in theory, you’d be

using the same bed as I use? I mean, what more do you need than you can have here?”

Blair smiled brightly at him. “I’m pretty proud of you right now,” he said. “And, since you asked, I’m going to need a study. A place where I can work in comfort – that space I’ve been living in does not qualify – where I won’t disturb you if you’re sleeping or I need to work while you’re watching a game or...”

“I get it, Chief. You think we need a bigger place.”

“He listens!” Blair said with a huge smile.

Then Jim’s attention seemed to shift inward; Blair watched closely as the expression on the other man’s face flowed from one thought to the next.

“You know what you want to do next,” Jim told him.

Blair shrugged. “Sorta. I think I want to write.” When Jim smiled at him, Blair continued, “Well, yeah, maybe the whole idea of writing something fictional about sentinels has crossed my mind. You know, actually do what I pretended to have done? Come on, Jim, don’t you want to be the sexy hero of my novel?”

Jim gave into a genuine laugh. “You kill me, Chief.”

“Point being,” Blair said, “that I’ll be needing somewhere to work that isn’t under those stairs over there.” He gestured at the other side of the room.

“So, moving,” Jim said, nodding. “You know how much I like change,” he added, voice groaning with irony.

“I have faith that you can handle it, Jim. And I also think you’d better get used to change since there’s gonna be a lot of it over the next few months.”

Jim nodded, crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. “Yeah, okay. How about we start by listing what each of us would want in a new place?”

“Practical, as usual,” Blair approved and reached for the pad of paper he always kept near the sofa. “Item one, office space for Blair. Your turn.”

“Big master bedroom,” Jim said, the hand he had resting on the back of the sofa near Blair moving to play with the curls at Blair’s nape.

Blair smiled. “Seconded,” he agreed. “Guest room. For Mom or whoever.”

“Why not make it two guest rooms? For when you kick me out of bed for being an asshole. ‘Cause you

know I will be and you will kick me out of bed,” he said levelly.

Blair shook his head. “Don’t be what you project, man. Or, rather, if you’re going to project, make it something really great instead of old habits.”

Jim tugged a little on the hair he held. “Okay, noted: no being an asshole.”

“Like that’s going to stick,” Blair muttered.

Jim scoffed, easing up on the hair and smoothing through the curls instead.

“I think a really great kitchen,” Blair continued.

“Absolutely a great kitchen.”

“Yard?”

“Hmm,” Jim said. “Wouldn’t be the first time I mowed a lawn if you want the space.”

“Or, you know, we could hire a gardener. Since I’m well-to-do now.”

“Okay,” Jim agreed. “Nice yard.”

Blair wrote that down on his list.

“As little noise as possible,” Jim said. “I’m used to the white noise generators and all, but it would be nice if I didn’t need them, or didn’t need them as much.”

“Quietness,” Blair said as he wrote that down on the list. “Any preference as to style of house?”

“Before I answer that, what do you think of fixer-uppers?”

“Well, I know I don’t need to go that route, not now with the money and all.”

“We could, theoretically, buy something old that needs restoration,” Jim agreed. “And I have enough money of my own, you know. I think we should go into everything fifty-fifty. To avoid weird feelings later on, weird dynamics as to who owns what.”

“Okay,” Blair agreed. “But mi dinero es su dinero.”

Jim nodded, smiling a half-smile.

They sat in silence for a little while before Blair said, “You know what just came to mind?”

Jim turned to look at Blair, who saw when the answer clicked for Jim. “That place up on Ridgeline? The one we both sigh over every time we drive past it? That house has been for sale for about three years.”

Blair nodded. “The house that’s been for sale for three years by the Washington State Conservatory.”

“So that’s why it hasn’t sold.”

“Yup. The Conservatory will demand authentic restoration, or as close as we could get.”

“That’ll be expensive,” Jim noted.

Blair nodded slowly. “I think between us, we can afford it.”

Jim looked worried for a moment before his eyes cleared and a small smile tipped his mouth. “You’re getting set on this idea, aren’t you?”

“Only if you want. We can look at anything you’d be comfortable living in, man. I mean, I’d move almost anywhere with you, for you. We can at least start there, right?” Blair didn’t wait for Jim’s answer. “I’ll call Charlie, you know, the guy down the block who works at Bay Realty and always gets his coffee from Max’s the same time we do on Sundays?”

Jim moved his arm so that it rested around Blair’s shoulders and he moved closer until Blair was smushed up against Jim’s side. The younger man laughed a little, throwing his pad of paper and pen onto the end table before leaning into the awkward embrace.

“You comfortable there, Chief?” Jim asked, his fingers finding their way to Blair’s curls once again, the head beneath his hand nodding.

“Yeah, real comfortable.”

“Hmmm,” Jim murmured as he bent his head and grazed the top of Blair’s hair with his nose. “You smell good.”

“Eau de ossobucco,” Blair said, voice drifting with Jim’s hypnotic touch.

“Eau de Blair Sandburg,” Jim corrected.

“How come nothing’s ever been as simple as this is right now?” Blair wondered. “Not that I’d trade a second of it – not a single second – but nothing’s ever been real easy for us, not from the beginning.”

“You mean your clever disguise as a medical doctor and my calm, restrained reaction to it?”

Blair laughed against Jim’s chest.

“I know, Chief. You and I can really tear at each other but at the same time support each other like I’ve never known anyone support someone before.”

I mean, we're best friends but who would have ever expected it on that first day we met?"

"Not me," Blair said, shifting to hug Jim a bit tighter. "I thought you were gonna kill me before I could explain anything."

"I wasn't at my best," Jim agreed.

"You were under a hell of a lot of pressure, man. With your senses all over the place and every doctor telling you nothing was wrong with you but you having all this proof to the contrary."

"I thought I was losing my mind," Jim said.

"I know," Blair soothed. "I wish there'd been help for you earlier. When you came home from Peru if not when you were a kid. And that's part of why I don't want to just turn my back on the whole Sentinel thing. I mean, how many people are out there thinking they've lost their mind? How many kids have been labeled autistic when, in actuality, their senses are off the scale? I need to put the information out there and if I have to write it up as fiction, so be it."

"I think that's a great idea," Jim said, shifting Blair so that they could look each other in the eye. "I think it's all a great idea. You writing. Us moving."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Jim bent to place his lips against Blair's forehead.

"I thought there'd be more of a fight. Didn't think I'd get you to budge," Blair confessed. "You love this place. It's your home, has been for a while. I wasn't sure you'd be open to leaving it."

"You're my home," Ellison said softly, eyes smiling into Blair's. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Not really," Blair said, rubbing his cheek against the hand Jim had back in his hair. "I think it's a perfectly logical progression."

"You do, huh?"

Blair nodded.

"I'm beginning to actively like the idea, to be honest. I mean, yeah, I like this place. It's mine, the first place I've ever owned. But the idea of more room is starting to appeal to me."

"You like the idea of all that potential wood work to be done if we get the place on Ridgeline."

Jim smiled at him. "Yeah, I really do."

"I'm no slouch with a hammer and saw myself, you know."

"I do know."

"I'm kind of excited about the idea now that we've started talking about it. I'd made a bet with myself that you'd want to move closer to the water, not farther away from it."

"Not that much farther. And just think of the view. Ocean vistas from just about every room."

"I am thinking about that," Blair assured him.

Jim pushed Blair's hair behind his ear with his free hand. "I'm thinking about you."

The blush that rose in Sandburg's cheeks was probably measurable by the Sentinel as his blood pressure rose. "Oh man," Blair whispered, his gaze darting between Jim's eyes and his mouth.

One finger moved to Blair's chin, then traced up across his slightly parted lips.

"So soft," Jim said. "So warm."

Blair's eyes closed of their own will and his mouth opened slightly more, capturing just the tip of Jim's finger, then licking at that little bit of flesh, tasting him.

"Hey," Jim complained, "who's the Sentinel around here? Guides do not do the tasting."

Blair laughed and released Jim. "No?"

"Uh-uh. You're supposed to be guiding me, right?"

"Okay," Blair agreed.

"So guide me." He traced Blair's lower lip suggestively.

Blair's intelligent eyes lit up and his face split into a knowing smile. "Oh, right. *Guide* you." He reached up and took Jim's hand that was loitering around his mouth and used it to pull the bigger man down to him, bringing their mouths together for a gentle kiss that was exploratory but anything but hesitant. Blair brushed Jim's mouth, then pulled back only to move in again, increasing the pressure of his lips against Jim's.

Jim moaned into the kiss, bringing Blair tighter to him, easing Blair's mouth open so that he could explore, taste, log data and search for more. He'd never been addicted to anything in his life; he was now addicted to the pure, sweet taste of the man in his arms.

Blair surged up, relaxing into Jim's arms, urging him on with small sounds and tiny movements, getting Jim's cooperation through the smallest of signals.

Long minutes were spent on the sofa, kissing and touching, quickly becoming thirsty for each other, needing the taste and tactile input of each other so they could go on breathing. The intensity built slowly, ramping up moment by moment, caress by caress and kiss by kiss.

Finally, Blair pulled back, running a thumb beneath Jim's lower lip even as Jim did the same for him. Their kisses had been wild, unencumbered, instinctual, but they had not been neat.

"You taste good, Chief," Jim said, voice half-drunk.

"I'd guessed that a while back," Blair told him.
"You're not so bad yourself."

"I'd guessed."

"Jerk." Blair sat up. "My jerk," he corrected himself and Jim smiled at him, reaching one long arm out to touch Blair's broad back.

"Wanna come upstairs with me, Chief?"

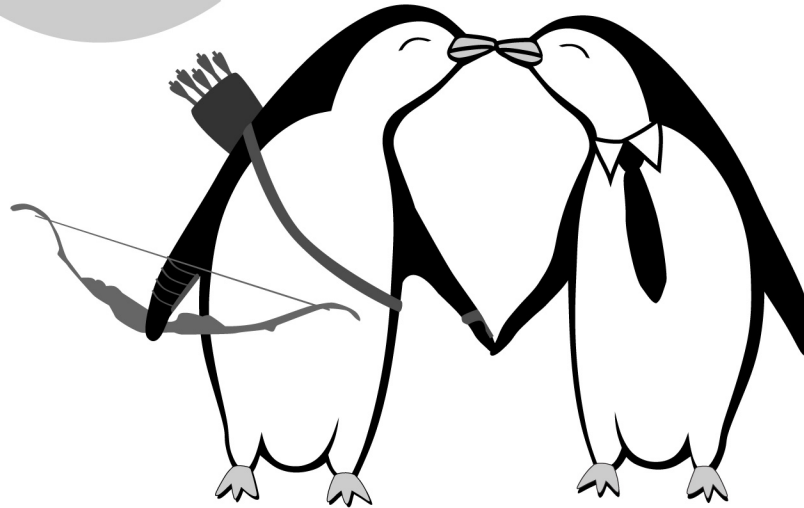
Blair gave him a "Seriously?" look before standing and pushing his hair out of his face. He sighed dramatically and reached a hand down toward Ellison. "If I must, I must," he said with a long-suffering roll of his eyes.

"Yeah, I can tell it's torture for you," Jim said as he stood, reeling Blair in to tuck him under one arm. He walked to the front door to check that it was locked, keeping Blair held to his side all the while, then continued on to do the rest of his nightly security check, a giggling Guide forced to go with him around the entire loft. "Am I hearing an objection here?" Jim asked as he pointed them toward the stairs.

Blair put one hand on Jim's hard stomach, another on his back, and said, "Oh, yeah, really got something to complain about."

"That's what I thought," Jim said as they climbed. "Better view of the world up here," he continued. "Hell of a lot better over than under the stairs."





Brazen it Out by Megan Kent

Editor's Notes

What do you say about a fandom that is born of MCU movies that *literally* have no scenes where the pairing shares the stage? Not even at a distance? Not even looking at each other across a field? What do you say about a fandom whose pairing's only interaction is in *one* movie (the first *Thor*, no less), and it's *on comms*, and the only thing you can say for sure is that they both got rained on, probably from the same storm and probably at the same base? What do you say about a fandom like that?

"**AWESOME!**" That's what you say about it.

Phil Coulson shrugged his garment bag higher on his aching shoulder and scanned the overhead signs for the hotel shuttles. Of course that sign was halfway down the terminal, and the bus he needed was just pulling away. He bit his lip rather than curse in front of the family of five that had blocked his path all the way from the last escalator. They piled into a minivan cab, which screeched away from the curb leaving skid marks and adding the stench of burnt rubber to LAX's already odoriferous fumes. Sighing, he hitched up his bag again and hauled his exhausted body toward the bus stop.

The wait for the next bus was long enough that he wondered briefly if he'd wandered into a previously unmapped time distortion field. He'd get the science team to check it out; it would explain so much. When the bus did arrive, the driver was a grandmotherly Asian woman with a wide smile full of teeth stained dark brown. She was half his size and still offered to heft his bag onto the rack, but Phil wasn't going to let the bag, or the tech inside, out of his hands in an insecure environment. He clutched it to his chest and dropped heavily into one of the hard plastic seats.

Before he had a chance to consider dozing off, the bus pulled up in front of his hotel. He slid his Pennsylvania driver's license and Costco-issued Amex card—both in the name of Phil Stone—across the check-in desk, receiving a card-key, a coupon for breakfast, and a tourist flyer for the Hollywood Wax Museum in exchange. He smiled, or tried to, and took extra care not to stumble as he boarded the elevator to his standard-issue room. At least the bottled water and internet were free. He engaged Fitz's newest security lock on the door, and finally let himself relax.

His new job as Director of the barely resuscitated SHIELD had him flying around the world like Santa Claus, making his own naughty and nice list. Except the part where he was flying coach, staying in airport business hotels, and the naughty people were trying to kill him. But some days were worth it, when he could reconnect with someone loyal to SHIELD, even better when he could convince them to return to the fold. He supposed it wasn't that different from when Howard Stark had launched the agency, hand-picking the first fifty agents, and creating the structure that would allow them to take action against threats so crazy that they could barely believe their own eyes.

Phil had just spent twelve hours in Hong Kong, crossing from the Island to the New Territories and back, following leads and ducking tails, to find a safe house that had clearly been abandoned in a rush. The thin layer of dust implied more than

a week and less than a month. Too long. Too late. The station's last communication had been nearly a month past. He could only hope that Agent Li had been able to get her staff to safety, and that they'd find a way to reach out again. Phil had left a couple of booby traps for his tails, or anyone else who stumbled into the safe house—annoying but not quite lethal—before he caught a random series of cabs and subways to the airport.

He'd had better luck on his layover in Honolulu. The airline lounge's drinks were watered down and the pretzels were stale, but the room had plenty of niches and sofas, perfectly suited for a clandestine check-in and handoff of a flash drive full of Hydra documents. Now if only Skye could break the encryption without destroying the data, they might make some progress.

Tomorrow he was headed to Visalia, in California's Central Valley, based on a handful of tabloid stories and blog posts about a young man with an uncanny skill at belomancy and picking ponies. A recent intercept indicated he might be on AIM's to-grab list. How was this his life?

Phil stripped out of his suit, showered off the sweat and grime of twenty-four hours of travel, and slid between cool sheets with his tablet, reading glasses, and two bottles of scotch from the mini-bar. Scanning down his newsfeed, he saw anomalous tsunami warnings in the mid-Pacific and sent a quick text to Melinda. She was probably already tracking the technical glitch, but the message would double as confirmation of his safe arrival. Nothing in his emails rose to the level of urgent, despite what the senders might think.

He closed out both apps, then launched a new, encrypted browser session, and clicked over to TMZ's Avengers stream. After he'd filtered out the Stark sightings and political commentary, there were a handful of new stories left, and he clicked through each one. Thor and Jane photographed in front of the Air and Space Museum in DC: probably real—Thor loved learning about Midgard's space exploration efforts—but not current since the cherry blossoms had bloomed and faded a month ago. *Black Widow Pregnancy Scare!* was a blurry photo of a redhead too tall to be Natasha, even if she'd been wearing 6-inch stilettos. He paused on the next one, a congratulatory photo op; the event was thanking the Avengers for what Phil knew had been defense and rescue during an AIM attack in Mexico City, and was being called a gas main explosion. Steve was shaking Presidente Espinoza's hand while the rest of the team looked on. They'd saved hundreds of citizens trapped in collapsed buildings, but they'd been too late for dozens of others; the story was far too familiar. The next piece was lighter:

Banner with coffee was a daily occurrence; the blogger had taken to cataloging the floppy hats he wore as futile disguises. There were no pictures of Clint, outside the group photo, so Phil touched his screen, scrolling back and zooming in to try to read his expression. There wasn't enough resolution, though, and Clint's face morphed into a blurry splotch.

He finally set the tablet aside, checked that his phone was charging and the alarm was set, and shut off the lights. He ran a hand down his chest, fingering smooth scar tissue before tracing further down, combing through rough hair and then giving his dick an exploratory squeeze. Not worth the effort, really. He let go, rolling to one side and pulling the covers up to his neck. Exhaustion dragged him under.

~ ~ ~

Shock had him on his feet and reaching for a gun that wasn't on his nightstand before he even processed what had woken him. The building vibrated under his feet, and the curtains were swaying. Earthquake! At least a six, by Phil's personal Richter scale. Fuck California and the fucking San Andreas. He was on the tenth floor of a hotel on the airport strip, with a wall of double-pane windows and nothing sturdier than a fiberboard desk to shelter under. He could try for the stairs if he had to... His phone shrieked an alarm, flashing alternate red and neon yellow, and he grabbed it before rolling into the kneehole of the desk, just in case.

He swiped his thumb to silence the alarm, and then scrolled through the list of increasingly frantic news reports: container ships seeming to vanish from the Los Angeles/Long Beach port complex, a rogue wave too localized to be a tsunami had washed away a dozen houses in Malibu in the pre-dawn hours, and now some kind of creature was oozing across the sand at Dockweiler Beach. The location didn't mean anything, until an aerial photo gave him perspective. The beach—what was left of it—was adjacent to the airport, maybe five miles from his current location as the crow—or iron-encased flamboyant hero—flies. He groped above his head for the TV remote, clicking on the power and scanning through the channels for a local news station. He'd have to come out from under the desk to see the screen, and given the still-rocking hotel tower he wasn't quite ready. The breathless description from the anchorwoman, who was probably more used to the celebrity beat, was enough to confirm that the Avengers were already on-scene. If he hadn't pulled the blackout curtains, Phil would probably be able to see Stark and Thor. He would give a lot for a live feed from the local

emergency services department, and more for the kind of integration SHIELD had once possessed. For now he could only listen, scan the web, and... He texted Melinda and Skye, to see if they could provide a real-time link to the Bus's systems, but the cellular data network was either overloaded or knocked down.

There was a distinct pop somewhere above, probably the roof, and the lights and TV cut off sharply. He checked...wi-fi too. An emergency light flickered on, and either the shaking was less or he was just getting used to it, so he took a chance and crawled out from under the desk. The room was relatively undamaged, which was probably an unintended benefit of bolting the artwork to the walls. Phil wrenched the curtains open, only to discover his room faced east, toward the city, so all he could see was a line of news helicopters headed toward the action, and the watery sunshine of an early Los Angeles morning.

He almost jumped when the hotel phone rang, then grabbed the receiver. The recorded voice was shaky, but the instructions were clear: "Police officials have declared a state of emergency. All flights are grounded and all civilians are warned to stay off the road." Phil could see out his window how little effect that declaration had had. "The hotel has lost power, and we are working to bring emergency generators online. Please remain safely in your rooms, keep your doors locked and your drapes closed, and wait for further instructions."

Being told to stay made him more aware than ever that he wanted to get out, and Phil pulled on yesterday's suit, pocketed his phone and room key, tucked the most valuable tech into a plastic laundry bag provided by the hotel, and disabled his security lock which (fortunately) had its own power source. The hallway was almost empty, dimly lit by emergency fixtures, and populated by a small crowd looking confusedly at the unresponsive elevator panel. Phil reset the locks behind him, and then hung the "do not disturb" sign. He'd be back, or send someone back for his things long before the hotel staff tried to force the door, if all went well. If things didn't, it probably wouldn't matter.

Tucking the laundry bag under one arm, he drew himself up into his official persona, both reliable and forgettable, and marched away from the elevators toward the emergency stairs. "You'd best wait inside, ma'am," he instructed thirty-something woman who was dressed for the gym. "And be sure to lock your door." She looked like she might argue, might challenge why he was allowed to be out. But in the end she drew back, and he heard the deadbolt click sharply. Good. He

bluffed once more—a Hispanic man in a business suit—then the fire door swung shut behind him.

The stair silo was remarkably empty. In the old days of SHIELD, Phil would have gone for the roof, to radio a helicopter or quinjet, or to oversee the action. But those days were past, and he ran down instead, counting off floors by the huge numbers painted on the walls, and pushing out through an emergency exit at ground level. He was outside, somewhere behind the parking garage, and away from both the airport strip and the main hotel entrance. A shuttle van, just sitting there, engine running and keys in the ignition was too big a temptation. He was four blocks west before he parsed the frantic crackling through the radio as the van dispatcher, trying to figure out where “Paulie” was going. They probably had a GPS in the bus. Phil reached up to turn the radio off, but instead scanned through the channels until he found the police band.

There was a current of controlled fear from the incident command center, but none of the panic that often accompanied Avengers-level catastrophes. Someone was running down a checklist of items: incoming flights diverted, subway trains stopped in stations, bus traffic halted, police control of major intersections. Speak of the devil, he could see the barricades a couple of blocks ahead, and wrenched the wheel hard to turn sharply into a side street, looking for another route.

A dozen furtive turns later he could at last see the ocean across an area that had once held homes, but was now a deserted wasteland, bordered by an unmanned, makeshift barricade of sawhorses and a garbage truck. Phil pulled right up to the barricade, and climbed up on top of the van, then up onto the garbage truck to get a view of the action. Half a mile south, the sky was buzzing with both news and police helicopters, and he thought he could make out a moving gleam of red and gold. A few seconds later there was a flash of lightning that removed all doubt.

Climbing back down with more care and stiffness than he'd like to admit, Phil rifled both trucks, pocketing a box cutter, a hand-held fire extinguisher, and a couple of Clif bars. A quick glance at his phone showed the network was still down, but he queued up a text and an email to base in hopes they'd send when the phone found a signal. He deserved some credit for not being a complete idiot, haring off into a fight without letting folks know where he was, right? Somehow, he didn't think May would buy his reasoning. But she wasn't here to argue, and the creature from the bottom of the ocean was *right up there.* And the Avengers, too, but that wasn't really the point.

A few minutes later, with sand sliding into his shoes, Phil crested the line of dunes. The creature, for want of a better term, was a mass of green and gray, not that different from the color of the ocean, really. But instead of surging in and out, it was creeping up the beach like a flow of lava, moving up from the sea instead of down to it. The advance wasn't consistent, either. As he watched, Thor directed a bolt of lightning into the leading edge. There was no sound, but the creature...flinched... Phil guessed he would call it. That section fell back a few yards, revealing the sand below stripped clean of kelp and the day-to-day rubbish and jetsam. It looked about four feet thick at the leading edge, and stretched out toward the horizon in both directions.

Up on the breakwater, a contingent of surfers and beachwalkers who'd had enough sense to draw back but not enough to run for their lives had gathered to watch the spectacle. Phil gave them a warning glare and kept moving. Just then a run-down lifeguard station collapsed as the creature reached it, and the crowd behind him screeched. Maybe they would get the message and get the hell out. Blue boards and old metal railings disappeared under the...blob, he was going to just call it a blob and be done with it. For less than a minute he could see the angular outlines of the building supports, and then the blob flattened out and went smooth again. Digestion? Disintegration? Some as-yet-unseen alien process? Phil knelt behind a concrete fire pit, though he had little hope it would fare better than the lifeguard hut if the blob got this far.

Just for the heck of it, Phil drew his gun and put three rounds into the thickest part of it and watched them disappear even quicker than the bits of lifeguard station. He tucked the gun away in favor of the bag of mystery tech he'd been carrying for thirty-six hours now. The agent who'd handed it off to him had only the vaguest idea of what it was intended to do. They'd had high hopes that what remained of SHIELD's science division could reverse engineer something they could use against both AIM and Hydra. But it wasn't like he had a lot of other options right now.

There was a gray canister, about four inches in diameter and the width of his fingers spread from thumb-tip to little finger. He weighed it in his hands, turned it over in search of any label or instructions, and saw only a small button in the center of one end. He set it aside. The next item out he was nearly certain was a miniature EMP generator, but for obvious reasons no one had been willing to test it yet. It was a clear box about eight by ten by two, stuffed with circuit boards and blinking lights. It didn't seem a likely weapon against a creeping blob thing. Last of all was a ball

of something like filament or wire, interspersed with tiny, brightly colored beads. Another complete mystery, but hopefully more destructive than the box-cutter which was currently his last line of defense.

He was weighing the canister. He could try pushing the button and flinging it into the blob, if he wanted to get that close to it. But the blob was still coming, had probably absorbed another 50 feet of sand in the seconds he'd taken his eyes off it. The advance wasn't even: it seemed like there were tendrils that would ooze outward, and then more blob would flow forward to fill in the space. He watched it another few seconds, to figure out where the next bit would grow. There was an explosion down the beach, and the scream of repulsors overhead as the Iron Man armor tracked along the border of beach and blob, strafing miniature missiles along the leading edge. Sadly, they had about as much effect as Phil's bullets.

Lightning yes, missiles and bullets no. Since Phil didn't have any lightning bolts lying around... He grabbed the cylinder first, and ran toward the nearest outthrust arm-ish bit. Running was perhaps too generous, since he sank ankle deep in the loose sand with each step, but it was faster than a walk, and hopefully faster than the advance of the blob. As he got closer, the smell of the thing was sweet, almost cloying, and it made a quiet grating noise as it slid over sand and rock. Before he could worry any more about it, he pushed the button on the cylinder, felt it begin to vibrate in his hand, and threw it with all his strength out toward the blob. He wanted to watch what happened, but he also wanted to not be consumed like the lifeguard station, so he turned and ran back to his makeshift shelter.

He slid to his knees behind the fire pit. There was no sign the cylinder had had any effect at all, so he reached for the EMP. Then he looked down the beach at the helicopters, the police shouting into radios, hell, even Iron Man, and set it aside again. He was trying to figure out what to do with the ball of wire, when a streak of gray and brown fur blew by him, toward the blob. It took a second to resolve into a small dog. He half expected to see a stupid owner go chasing after it, and Phil would be left trying to rescue them both.

No owner showed up, though, and he thought he ought to be grateful. "Here, doggie, doggie." Yeah, that wasn't going to work. Phil grabbed the wire and the fire extinguisher, and took off after the damn thing. It was dancing in and out, barking and biting at the edge of the blob, but so far managing to stay far enough away to avoid being... eaten. Phil tried a sharp whistle, which had about as much effect on the dog as his bullets had on the

blob. Damn it. He was close enough now to feel heat coming off the blob, and almost close enough to try grabbing the dog's trailing leash. He couldn't say for sure what senses the blob had, but it seemed ready to ooze out toward him.

Phil missed the leash, so instead he shifted his grip on the fire extinguisher, pointing the hose right at the jutting-out bit of blob, and squeezed the trigger. The rush of sound and cloud of chemicals startled the dog to silence, and then the blob sort of...groaned. He squeezed another short blast, and the leading edge dropped back a few feet, turning pink. Finally, something was working! He looked around for someone to tell, wished for a working earpiece, or maybe some flags so he could do semaphore. The dog, apparently as shocked as he was, backed up, and Phil managed to catch the leash and drag it up the beach. He waved his fire extinguisher overhead, in case someone—a helicopter or maybe someone with insane eyesight—might get the message.

He got a ragged cheer from the crowd of onlookers, one of whom rushed forward to grab the dog's leash. Phil ignored the offered handshake, and turned his attention back to the fight. The blob was advancing again, but he thought the pink part was slower. Maybe injured, but certainly not out of it. Hefting the extinguisher, he figured he had maybe one long or two short blasts left, and then he'd be back in the same situation if something didn't change, and quickly. The only card he had left to play was the ball of wire, purpose unknown. He untwisted a few feet of it, light but sturdy; he bent a length of it out into a point. There was really nothing for it but to try. He extended the point as far as he could before it started to bend under its own weight, about a yard. Closer than he really wanted to be to the damn thing, if he'd had any choice about it at all. Right.

Tucking the wire under his jacket so he had both hands free, Phil set off again down the beach, not as far a hike this time, and that was its own worry. He paused when he was close enough to feel the heat of it, hoping that this wasn't as stupid a move as he thought it was going to be. He sprayed first, one long blast, tracking along the face of it in front of him until the fire extinguisher sputtered and died. Tossing it aside, he pulled out his pointy wire, took a moment to breathe, reached to the very length of his arm, and stabbed it a few inches into the blob.

It exploded.

Phil slammed hard into the beach, back and then head, and his vision went bright and blurry.

Some time... seconds? minutes? later he propped himself up on one elbow, then both, and looked

around. There was no blast crater. He looked down at his shirt: no blood, but there was a tingle from his left shoulder to his fingertips. Not an explosion, then, maybe some kind of electrical discharge. He looked further; the blob was still there, but something had clearly made a difference. There was a section five or six feet wide that was black.

A low rumbling built to a loud roar as a huge plane hove into sight. Flying low, probably under a hundred feet, a C130 showing its age and plenty of wear turned to follow the coastline. Vents on the belly were already open, and as he watched a cloud of orange chemicals poured out. Someone *had* been watching, and gotten the message. The plane continued south, and all along its path the blob seemed to flinch back. But the part right in front of Phil, where he'd stabbed it, didn't flinch. It was still. Damaged, maybe even dead. The bits to either side were pulsing, maybe even trying to ooze forward again, but they were apparently stuck.

Phil pawed around on the sand until he came up with the wire. Stabbing it was right out, but maybe he could snare it. Well, not snare exactly, but— He unwound more of the ball of wire as he approached, cautious in case it had some way to recognize him or the threat the wire presented. But it really did seem to be stuck by the burnt part, even as a tendril further up the beach it was moving forward again.

He laid the wire down like a tiny fence, unrolling it along the leading edge of the blob until he ran out. It was maybe thirty yards when he was done, with the little beads glinting in the sunlight, and Phil backed away carefully, wanting to see if the weird wire would do it again.

It did.

One of the tendrils touched the filament, and it was like watching a downed power line. Sparks flew, the wire jumped and writhed like a snake, and a bit of the blob seemed to die. But it didn't learn, and the next bit, ten feet down the line, tried to cross again, with the same result. Fantastic, but what the hell was going to happen at both ends of the wire?

He was trying to figure out if he could extract the wire, and maybe drag it further down the beach to try again, except that he didn't really want to go through that sort-of-explosion thing again. Then Thor was in the sky overhead, sending bolts of lightning down, followed by a Blackhawk helicopter raining electric arrows out the open door in the fuselage.

Phil heaved a sigh of relief and retreated across the road. The remains of the creature, limp and scorched around the edges, still covered the beach like an ugly blanket, and he was just as glad cleanup was outside his purview these days. Let the EPA fight it out with the locals for that joy. He looked down at his watch, but the glass was crazed and the mechanism unmoving; he fruitlessly checked his phone, and then looked up to the sun which was just past zenith. He could make it back to the hotel to shower and gather his stuff, and still be in Visalia before dark, if he could get the hell out of this suburban war zone without being caught on someone's cellphone video, or arrested for grand theft airport van.

Returning the van probably was his best bet anyway, so he started to slog back north along the paved road. He was barely three steps onto the pavement before he was almost run down by a rusted old Subaru with a young woman not much older than Skye or Simmons behind the wheel. The car screeched to a stop close enough that Phil could feel the heat of the engine against his knees.

"Sorry!" The woman? Girl? —he settled on "driver"—stuck her head out the window and the furry, familiar face of the dog from the beach followed. "God, I'm sorry," she gushed. "I was just— Thor—" She looked back over her shoulder and then back at Phil, and her eyes widened. "You saved Daisy! Thank you! OH, but did you see them?"

Phil nodded, and stepped aside to let her pass.

"I mean, it was incredible, right?" She showed no sign of moving, even though there were more cars lining up behind her, including an LAPD black and white.

"It really was," he offered, and tried to wave her on.

"Radical!" she nodded, and finally pulled her head inside her car. Phil sighed, but then she was leaning out again, wrapping one arm around the dog to keep it from falling all the way out. "You're a hero too! Are you okay? Do you need a lift, man?"

Phil started to shake his head, but then looked back at the growing line of cars, which now included a news van with a satellite boom. "I don't want to impose," he protested, but moved around quickly to the passenger side. When she lifted the lock, he slid inside.

"It's the least I can do. Don't worry about it." She gunned the engine, and left the line of cars behind her in an oily plume of exhaust. "Daisy here is a great judge of character." She patted the dog with one hand that Phil would really rather she kept on

the steering wheel and swerved past the remains of one of the barricades. "Where are you headed?"

"The Embassy Suites." He wasn't, but it was across the street from the Four Points Sheraton he'd left so abruptly about seven hours ago.

"Which one?"

Crap. How could there be more than one? "On Airport Boulevard," he vaguely remembered from his sleepy bus ride last night. He set aside the van-guilt again, and patted at his pockets. He'd at least give her some cash for gas. Except for the part where he'd left his wallet in the hotel room.

"Okeydokey." She smiled wider, taking two turns on successively smaller side streets, before miraculously pulling up in front of the Embassy Suites sign. Phil figured it would take digital mapping and a complex algorithm to retrace their path.

"Thanks, miss..." He realized he didn't even know her name.

"Just Jessie." She nodded at the dog. "And Daisy."

"Thank you, Jessie," he repeated, not offering his own name, and got out, closing the door carefully.

"Thanks again! Bye!" she called out, pulling away almost before he had a chance to get his hand clear.

So much for his subterfuge. Just in case, he did walk into the Embassy Suites, through the lobby full of chattering business travelers, families, and tourists staring raptly at CNN, past the check-in desk, then through the restaurant, and out the service door to the loading dock. He listened carefully to see if he'd been noticed or followed, and when it seemed not, he crossed the street and walked purposefully around to the back door of the Sheraton.

The electricity was back on; automatic doors slid open to admit him, and he walked through the lobby, toward the main elevator bank, past the front desk and the bar. And stopped. He'd caught, just out of the corner of his eye, a face both too familiar and completely out of place. Phil retraced his steps, and paused in the open entrance to the bar. There was a perky young woman behind the bar, her bleached-blond hair piled on top of her head, and a vast array of beers displayed behind her. She wasn't the one he was interested in. Phil scanned across the tables and patrons; he might have judged them more harshly for drinking their lunches if he didn't have his own tendencies that way after too close an encounter with weird, amazing, psychotic life forms. A waiter came

out of the kitchen, balancing a tray piled high with burgers and onion rings on one shoulder. It blocked his face until he set it down, and Phil's breath caught in his chest.

It wasn't Clint.

Of course it wasn't. He was still down by the beach, wearing a sweaty, skin-tight Avenger's uniform, not a hotel's livery, or perhaps he was already on a quinjet back to New York, fending off someone trying to administer first aid or extract an after-action report. And if this young waiter/aspiring actor with a crooked nose, messy shock of blond/brown hair, and broad shoulders evoked Hawkeye, that said a lot more about Phil's precarious mental state than the man's actual looks. Phil took a deep breath, forcing his heart to slow, and not letting himself respond when the waiter shot him a look and a slight smile. He'd been caught staring. It was a damn good thing his team wasn't here to see him. Either team.

Phil turned away sharply, and caught the elevator back to his floor. He glanced at his wrist: the watch was still broken. He checked the phone one more time: still out, damn it. But his lock was still engaged, and functioning, so he let himself in and then leaned back on the door, just breathing for a minute. He was in worse shape than he'd thought if seeing a Clint lookalike shook him up more than an ocean-carpet-alien thingy attacking Los Angeles. He clenched his eyes shut, rubbing at them until flares of light wiped away both the waiter and the blob; when he opened them he was back in control. He toed off his sandy shoes and stripped out of the ruined suit, then padded into the bathroom to start the shower.

Socks, shirt, and underwear landed in a sad pile on the floor, but his broken watch and his useless phone clicked softly on the tile of the bathroom counter alongside the rest of his pocket contents. Hot water was still one of the true benefits of civilization, Phil thought as he stepped under the warm flow, soaping away sweat, sand, and fear, then scrubbing fingers gently through his hair. It was hard to admit that his hair was thin enough now that his head was sunburnt just from being outside without a hat. Embarrassing to admit that he cared, considering the gravity of the threats his organization dealt with on a daily basis. Maybe this was what it was to be human.

His phone beeped, and kept beeping, then started vibrating against the counter. He sighed, turned off the shower, and climbed out, picking it up and swiping to unlock it before it went any more crazy. In the sudden silence, things weren't as silent as they should be. Anderson Cooper was droning from the TV set that had been off and dark when

Phil had entered his room. And whoever had turned it on had just as surely heard the shower cut off and the phone go silent.

Phil slid his stolen boxcutter into his hand and kicked gently at the door, letting it swing open slightly. "Hello?" he called, listening for where his visitor(s) were placed in the room.

"Come on out, Phil." The gravely voice was familiar. Comforting.

"Just a sec." He wrapped a towel around his waist, rubbed another at his dripping hair, dropped the box cutter into his shaving kit, and stepped into the room.

Clint was slouched in the armchair in the corner, legs propped up on Phil's unmade bed, still wearing that skin-tight uniform Phil had been imagining earlier. The whole room smelled of sweat and smoke, and Phil wished that his shower had been quite a bit colder right about now. Clint shouldn't be here. They both knew it. So Phil just raised an eyebrow and waited.

"Hey, boss." Clint muted the TV, but seemed to be more interested in checking Phil out than getting on with an explanation.

"Barton," Phil warned.

"C'mon, Phil," Clint wheedled. "I'm not the one who wandered into your op. You don't get to pin this one on me."

He was more right than wrong. They'd all agreed to keep the new SHIELD and the Avengers separate, for everyone's benefit. Tony Stark generated enough tabloid press all on his own, even before he'd had to establish a fund to cover Hulk-damage after Avengers operations. They didn't need to be tied any closer to SHIELD, Hydra, or Ward for that matter. And if SHIELD wanted to be taken seriously they were going to have to stand on their own. By that argument, Phil shouldn't have gone anywhere near the beach this morning. But he wasn't sorry.

Agreeing to stay out of each others' way had fallout in other areas. It had been almost three months since Phil had seen Clint, even at a distance. More than four since they'd been alone. And yes, damn it, he *was* counting.

"Okay, you're right." Phil rounded the bed and bent down, taking a deep sniff and then leaning in for a kiss. Clint's strong, square hands settled on his waist, digging into his hips and pulling him forward until he had to push away or fall over. "Hang on. Wait!"

"I don't want to wait." Clint pulled again, but pressing hard into buckles and straps only reminded Phil he was mostly naked, and Clint wasn't.

"I don't want to either. But—"

Clint whined, low in his throat. "Don't say we can't, Phil." Phil could do the right thing, shut this down before it got out of hand. More out of hand. And Clint wouldn't fight him, much. But he wanted this as badly as Clint did; he wanted to give Clint what he wanted even more.

"All right, all right."

Encouraged, Clint pulled at him again, but Phil resisted. "Just give me a few minutes." Phil waved toward the bathroom. "You go shower—" Clint pouted comically "—and I'll make sure that my team and yours don't decide to check up on us, okay?"

"I guess." Clint flexed his hands again, then stood, pulling Phil in close again. "Three minutes." He stepped away, and this time Phil was almost the one to pull him back, to hold on. He didn't, and instead wasted twenty seconds watching Clint shed his uniform piece by piece on the way to the bathroom. Clint didn't bother to shut the door.

Phil grabbed his tablet; if he went back to the bathroom for the phone he'd never get this done. He scanned the messages from bottom to top, flagged a few for responses and trashed the rest. Half of them had been out of date before he stole the van, and the others mostly dealt with things he'd seen first hand anyway. But he answered May, Skye, and his contact at the WSC. Next, he sent a post to the Avengers "listserv" (it was something much more technologically advanced, which would message across all platforms, and even into near space, but Phil loved the way calling it that raised Stark's blood pressure, so he wasn't giving it up any time soon) that he had eyes on Hawkeye, and they wouldn't appreciate any interference for the next twenty-four hours. Last, he sent a private message to Pepper, asking her to find something to distract Stark. He'd owe her a favor, but it was worth it.

Two minutes fifteen seconds after it started, the shower shut off. Phil switched the tablet into airplane mode and fished behind the desk for the charging cable. When he looked up, Clint was leaning in the doorway, a towel around his neck, a foil packet in one hand and a well-worn tube in the other. Water was trailing down his front, leaving tracks in the fine hair, then gathering, darkening lower.

Phil's breath caught, and he wanted to look everywhere at the same time. Head to toe first, scanning for injuries, and pleased to come up empty for once. Then back up, admiring skin flushed warm from the shower and musculature so sculpted that Phil's fingers itched to touch. Finally back to Clint's face and the smirk saying he'd followed every thought that had flitted through Phil's brain. It would be embarrassing he didn't have higher priorities right this damn minute.

With two quick steps across the room, Phil dragged the covers from the messy bed to the floor. Climbing on from the other side, Clint met him in the middle, dropping the supplies and wrapping hard, warm hands around Phil's back and butt, dragging his towel down and away, pulling their bodies together and rolling. Phil relaxed, closing his eyes for a moment, and savoring the strong arms and gentle guidance. He was only half surprised to wind up as the one on top, pressed hard against Clint from chest to very eager groin, held firmly between bent knees. Warm air rushed by his ear, followed by an even warmer tongue, sending a shiver all the way to his toes. Phil groaned quietly. Clint chuckled, then nipped, almost too hard, before sucking the earlobe in, probing for the tiny hole that hadn't felt this in far too long.

"Don't," Phil protested, turning to bring his mouth in line with Clint's. "That's cheating." Before Clint could argue, Phil pressed a kiss into his parted lips, teasing in with his tongue and then opening to Clint's reply. He brought both hands up to frame Clint's face, combing through damp, short hair, holding him still and delving deeper. Strong, callused hands slid down to his ass, pulling him in tighter, as close as they could get without being in each other's skin, and they'd get there, soon enough.

~ ~ ~

"You were so hot out there." Clint's voice was quiet, almost reverent. Phil dragged his eyes open and his mind back to consciousness. He hadn't felt sexy. He'd felt like an idiot, throwing everything that he had at some weird, alien thing, and just hoping like hell something would work.

"When did you notice me?" He hadn't known where in the fight Clint was, hadn't had a thought to spare at the time. He realized now there hadn't been any buildings left near the beach. It was a damn airport approach.

"When you broke cover to try and grab the dog, you idiot." The insult was fond. "I'd ask you what you were thinking..."

But they both knew. The mutt had just been doing what they all had: trying its damndest to stop the creepy crawly thing from taking over the beach, and then going on to do whatever else had been in its plans.

"What the hell was that wire thing you used, anyway?"

"Hell if I know," he admitted. "Gianni pulled it out of an AIM base in the Zamboanga Peninsula, and I was taking it back to FitzSimmons to figure out what it does."

"Oh, well."

Phil stretched an arm and a leg, pulling himself closer, almost back on top of Clint, and laid his head down on one broad shoulder.

"Hey," Clint protested. "Don't go back to sleep. I want some lunch." He didn't move, though, and Phil fantasized for a second that he could ignore Clint's hollow leg and get a few hours of rest. Not that it had ever worked before. "Come on," and this time he did shrug, dislodging Phil's very comfortable head. "Avenging is hungry work."

"Let's just order room service." There had to be a menu around here somewhere, and he couldn't think of any better use for his fake credit cards.

"I tried." The bed heaved as Clint stood up, opening Phil up to the cool breeze of the AC. "They're short staffed today, you know, because of the alien invasion."

Phil lay there, trying to figure out how deeply he'd been asleep that he hadn't heard Clint on the phone.

"I've got a Clif bar." He'd know he'd had his hands on one, or two, at some point today, but he tried to picture where, and whether he'd eaten it, lost it, or fed it to the dog. He had no clue. "Maybe," he qualified. He watched, still sleep-dazed, as Clint produced a duffel Phil hadn't even noticed and stepped into a pair of black jeans that never failed to raise the ambient temperature of any room Barton walked into.

Phil groaned, then levered himself upright, feeling aches and bruises that he hadn't even noticed before. Clint noticed, and stepped closer to run a hand down Phil's back, brushing lightly across the hot skin. "How bad?" he asked. "Do you want me to get some ice?"

"It's nothing." Phil turned, pressing a quick kiss to the corner of Clint's mouth. "Give me a sec." He pulled away, and dug into his bag for the khakis and blue polo that were Phil Stone's weekend uniform.

“Can we at least mark the calendar for a fight where I don’t even have a scratch, and you’re the one that got the shit kicked out of him by a sea-monster?”

“Blob,” Phil corrected, pulling up boxers and khakis. “And it didn’t kick the shit out of me. That was the stupid wire.”

“Whatever,” Clint countered, reaching out to comb fingers through Phil’s mussed hair. “Aren’t you ready yet?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Phil pulled on the shirt, and gathered his phone, wallet, and room key from the bathroom counter. “I’m ready.”

The bar was quieter, now past the lunch hour and the shock of the morning, but news was still running silently on all the screens. Most of the footage was Iron Man, of course, with occasional insets of the C-130, and Thor. Lots of Thor.

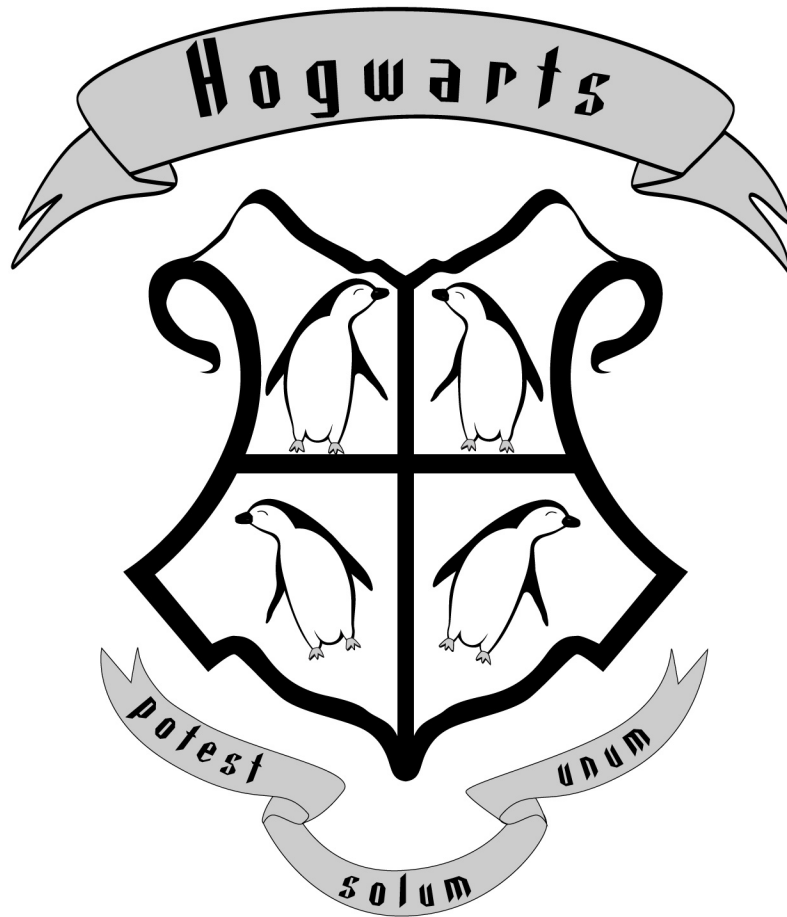
Phil was glad he’d been far outside the media glare, and it looked like Clint and Natasha had done their usual trick of being invisible in plain sight. He spotted her in the background of one shot, saw more arrows than he saw of Clint himself. They settled into one of the alcoves, seated close on one side of the table so they could watch the coverage.

“We couldn’t have done it without you,” Clint offered, nudging Phil with his shoulder. “What were you even doing with a fire extinguisher against a sea monster, anyway?”

“Long story.” And not one he was planning to tell any time soon, though he made a mental note to make sure the van was returned, and restitution paid, so he wouldn’t have to deal with the LAPD lifting his prints off a stolen vehicle.

The waiter, when he stepped into their niche, was still a surprise. Phil looked up, met the man’s amused gaze, and then decided to just brazen it out. He wrapped one arm around Clint’s back, and smiled widely. “My husband and I would like some lunch, please.”





Intervention by Glacis

Editor's Notes

When I saw *Highlander* fusion with SG1, with some *Buffy* and *Harry Potter* I thought, "How is *that* going to work?" I won't ruin it by telling you how it works. I'll say only that it does.

Intervention

by Glacis

Author's Notes

A SG1/Highlander fusion with a stray Buffy character and a Harry Potter anchor by Glacis. Spoilers up to and AU after: Stargate SG-1 season 8, Threads; Highlander season 6, Indiscretions; Buffy season 6, Once More with Feeling; the entire Harry Potter series. Intended for adult readers. Warnings: time travel, fluff, bad language, gay sex, and a whole lot of flashbacks (all entirely necessary to the plot, of course).

France, 2005

Methos stared out over the boringly perfect landscape, half-listening to Joe fiddling around on his guitar. There was a gig coming up, time to head back to Paris for a little while, he guessed. He sighed and wondered if it was worth the effort to get up and get another beer.

Five thousand years old, and bored out of his mind.

It didn't used to be this bad. For a very long time, he'd wandered. Lost his mind for a millennium or so, damned horsemen who just wouldn't give up already, then spent quite a long time running from Kronos. He'd gotten away for a while, immersed himself in the magical world. Then, well, hell had broken loose, and he'd run back to the mundane world. A few centuries playing in the old world (China was interesting) and the new (the early years of the USA were fun), but then he'd slipped into routine. Once in awhile he'd meet a friend, have a tumble – unless Rowan saw him first, then there'd be a chase before the tumble. But for the last couple centuries he'd kept it calm and quiet, until the Highlander came along.

More excitement than one old man could handle, right there. Even before the demon showed up.

Still, it hadn't been boring. Much as he loved Joe, and he did... if something didn't happen soon, he was going to do something drastic.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Eridu, Southeastern Mesopotamia, circa 3800 BCE

The young man sat perfectly still under the watchful eye of his master. His hands applied perfect, unwavering pressure as they carved the cuneiform into the clay tablet. His face was utterly expressionless, the perfect temple scribe. No one could tell by looking at him that he was bored nearly out of his mind, wondering if this was all there ever would be to his life... clay, sore fingers, tired wrists, complete boredom, and the interpersonal politics that were the only amusement he got out of life.

He couldn't even find a lover. The master watched them all too closely. It was intensely frustrating.

Still, he did have that little plot going to undercut the apprentice to the Offerings master. The little bastard thought he could get Methos' share of the wine, last festival. Watered down as it was, it was still his wine, and Methos didn't appreciate people stealing from him. The scrap of cloth he'd planted in the other man's quarters should be enough to start the whispers. He'd let it simmer just long enough to catch the Head Priest's attention, then he'd have his friend... minion... indentured servant hide the fragment of pottery in the bastard's room. That should break the thief's reputation nicely. When he was beaten out of the temple with sticks, he'd damned well learn to leave other people's wine jugs alone.

The smirk still lingered on his lips as he stepped around the corner toward his quarters at the end of the day. He was, unfortunately, too caught up in anticipatory gloating to notice the slave's presence in the shadows.

He certainly felt the knife that slid through his ribs into his heart. It was like ice stealing his breath, leaving him lying in a swiftly-spreading pool of blood. It actually hurt more coming out than it did going in. One hand scrabbled weakly against the wet stone floor before falling still.

Waking up was a shock.

Being chased out of the temple, with his pursuers screaming that he was a demon, was a bigger one.

Methos lost track of how many times he died trying to cross the desert.

After awhile, it all got a little blurry. As time passed, it became harder and harder to recall, until the only thing he could remember was the shock of regaining life, and a lingering distaste for wine.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Achmore, Scotland, circa 2500 BCE, Beaker village

Daniyyel sat quietly in the shelter of the stone hut, listening to the wind batter against the walls. It was hard to see by the guttering fire, but he was patient, gently tapping out tiny dots around concentric circles in a sheet of copper. His people were rightly proud of their artistry in metal, and he was one of the finest hands in the tribe.

His vision twinged, and the bright blue eyes shut tightly. Feeling his way quickly, he placed his work out of harm's way, barely in time before the vision hit.

His people were proud of their seer.

He thought it was a terrible gift, inconvenient, painful, and most of the time, too late to do any good.

Like now.

The raiders hit the village like thunder. They were upon them before he could leave the hut, much less give warning. Surrounding him was a cacophony of screams, the dull thud of bodies hitting stone, the squelch of spears piercing bodies. His magic brought his spear to his hand, and he crouched, moving to the side and thrusting upward. The point struck true, but the haft was not strong enough, and broke under the weight of the corpse falling toward him. Before he could disentangle himself from the heavy body, still

clutching the broken wood in his fist, a flash of movement came from his right.

The world went white in a splash of bright pain, then sweeping numbness.

When he woke, he was alone amid the broken remains of his village. He was too numb to cry, as he washed the blood from his clothes. Gathered what he could scavenge. Worked as quickly as he could, curling his friends' bodies into holes in the ground, gently placing what few belongings remained beside the few intact bodies he could bury, always watching over his shoulder in case the raiders should return. Then he left, not once looking back.

Thus began the wanderer's life.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Minoan Crete, circa 2300 BCE

He'd felt him before he'd seen him. Methos followed the man from the temple to the market, watching him as the sun rose. He was beautiful, not as tall as Methos himself, but broader in the chest and thicker in the thighs. Strong hands, narrow waist, long legs... just his type.

Too bad he'd have to take his head.

The other Immortal took his time, picking over fruit, as Methos followed, keeping carefully out of sensing range. It was the wrong time and place for a battle, too many witnesses, too many questions when the lightning began to fly. So when the other man ducked around behind a stable, Methos followed.

The sword tip under his chin was a surprise.

"I take it you aren't in the mood for a talk?"

"Why are you following me?"

Oh, very pretty indeed. Intense, bright blue eyes ringed in thick lashes, a pouty mouth doing its best to be stern, a furrowed brow that tried to be intimidating and just made Methos want to smooth it with his fingers.

"Don't you know?" Maybe there was time for a fuck before the fight? He was used to taking it where he could find it, and this one was sweet.

The brow furrowed a little more. It was adorable. The sword didn't waver. Damn it.

"You will not take my head." He sounded so determined! Methos grinned a little, then raised a bit up on his toes as the sword lifted a bare inch.

"Not even the little one?"

Ah, yes, perverse flirtation, that almost always worked as a distraction. The sword shook, for only an instant, but it was long enough. A shift to the side, down to the left, a leg going out, one hand knocking away the fists wrapped around the hilt, the other tugging just so on that trim waist, and Methos had a catch worth savoring.

The man stared at his own sword now being held to his throat and growled.

“So, my name’s Adam,” Methos lied. “What’s yours?”

Incredulous blue eyes stared up at him.

“Right, nameless, would you put up a fuss if I kissed you?”

The man was still sputtering when Methos tossed his sword into a nearby water trough, grabbed his shaggy brown hair, and licked the man’s lips.

He tasted of citrus.

When he finally let the man breathe, he heard a strangled, “Not here!”

“Your place, then?”

It was, and they did.

They barely maintained a semblance of propriety (well, Nameless did. Methos was too busy pulling down the neckline of his tunic so he could suck on his pulse point) as they stumbled toward lodgings. It wasn’t much, barely a hole in the wall, but it was private, and there were cushions and draperies of a sort.

Not like he cared. He’d finally gotten the straps untangled.

Once Nameless was past his fear of getting beheaded and his modesty at being stripped in public, he turned out to be a firebrand. His hands were as busy as Methos’, unwrapping and pushing fabric and leather away, tossing Methos’ sword with the same disregard as his own had been tossed, though that might have been one last stab at ensuring personal safety.

He hadn’t quite gotten that it wasn’t his Quickening Methos was after.

Then he did something truly unexpected.

Rough cloth pulled itself over the entryway, cutting out the sunlight. Fat candles placed about the tiny room flared to life. A cool breeze came from nowhere.

Magic.

Methos’ grin slipped from anticipatory to feral. He’d had magicals before. He’d had an Immortal or two. He’d never had a magical Immortal.

He’d thought he was the only one.

It just got better from there. He dragged his own magic up to the surface, flaring it a little. Nameless smiled up at him, eyes sparking with interest and magic, then pulled him down into a hungry kiss. Long fingers tangled in his hair, holding him in place, tilting his head just so, falling into the hunger. His own hands weren’t idle, now that all that warm skin was freed of its cloth covering. The musk rising from him was intoxicating, the movement even more so.

Mouths slipped apart and roamed, lingering on the line of a throat, tightening around a nipple, nibbling along the inside of a thigh. They found themselves head to thigh to one another, and he found the taste heady, slick, salty. The pulse of Quickening between them, the rush and flow of magic surrounding them, the carnal heat of bodies sliding against one another... it was all too soon, too fast. Methos pulled away and gulped air, determined not to finish first, then bucked his hips when Nameless did something *very* talented with his tongue.

So much for not coming too soon.

He was flying, a tight-wound ball of tension exploding into pure relaxation, magic pushing the peak higher. It was always that way with another mage, that extra layer of reality, making the colors so much sharper, scents and sounds and sensations so much more intense. It didn’t stop there, as he felt himself held, lifted, turned. Nameless slid behind him, slid into him, an inferno against his back and his hips, hands like a raptor’s on his hips.

Then the tension built again, and Methos gave himself to it, letting Nameless lead him, take him, set the pace and punish him with it. For a short while that felt like forever, there was nothing in the world but the connection between them. Hard, and deep enough to touch his heart if he had one, Nameless carved his way into Methos and pulled him completely out of himself.

When he reached the peak again, he pulled his lover with him. A contraction, connection made and dissolved.

Fingers unclenching, falling to lie against his stomach, his hip. A warm breath panting against the back of his neck, heat blazing from his shoulder to his knees, sweat and semen and lightning dancing across their skin.

If every death were like this one, he'd be fighting a lot more often.

"Daniyyel," Nameless mumbled into the wet hair at the nape of Methos' neck.

"Eh?" Perhaps not the most intelligent response, but he couldn't make his tongue form words quite yet.

"Stop calling me Nameless. Name's Daniyyel."

Oh. Apparently he'd been moaning the wrong name... well. Now he knew.

He put the new knowledge to good use. It was a very long day, and a nice long night.

It was halfway through the next day, when they desperately needed food, before they dragged themselves out into the sunlight. Daniyyel, as he now knew him to be, cursed when he saw the state of his sword. It had been a pretty mucky water trough. More like a piss trough, really.

Methos was still laughing when Daniyyel used the blunt edge of the blade to beat him.

Yes. Very mucky.

That was alright, though. Muck led to bathing. Bathing required nudity. Nudity led to interesting activities. Which got them kicked out of the baths.

The next several months were more fun than Methos had in years. His new lover was inventive, intelligent, paranoid, and had great stamina. He was also a priest in a local goddess cult, which supposedly enforced chastity, so there was the added thrill of avoiding discovery. He didn't know how long he would have stayed, if he hadn't made the mistake of drinking a little too much beer one day when Daniyyel was on duty and getting into a bit of a dust-up with a few of the local thugs.

Unfortunately, they were better with knives than he expected, a lesson in underestimation of the enemy that he should have learned before, but really took to heart, after the knife was removed from it. Daniyyel was staring down at him disapprovingly when he jolted back to life.

"Shit," Methos grumbled.

Daniyyel was in the process of handing him a bag and kissing him goodbye – well, groping more than kissing, really, but Methos wasn't complaining – when the man stiffened in his arms. Methos leaned back and stared.

The blue eyes were dull, almost silver, with tiny bolts like Quickenings slashing across the iris. It wasn't the first time Methos saw a seer caught in a vision, but it was the closest he'd ever been.

He dropped his bundle, wincing at the thump of his water bag when it hit the stones, and held onto his lover. Daniyyel shuddered, his eyes flickering rapidly side to side, the silent lightning storm turning them from silver to flashing white. As quickly as it came, it passed, and he took a deep, wracking breath. It was only then that Methos realized Daniyyel hadn't breathed all the way through it.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Daniyyel's head bowed and he shivered once, hard, before shaking it off. Lifting his head, he stared hard into Methos' face.

"Pain," he whispered, "and death. When next we meet, the cycle begins."

The gravity in the words sent a chill up Methos' spine. Attempting to lighten the atmosphere, he laid a butterfly kiss on the end of Daniyyel's nose. "At least that means we will meet again, yeah?"

He probably deserved the punch in the belly that got him.

Still, he looked forward to it. This one was as close to a keeper as he'd found so far.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Aram, circa 420 BCE

Malaga to Carthage, Sulcis to Rome, Epirus to Lycia to Tyre, Daniyyel had wandered for centuries. Ancient magics called him, feeding his hunger to learn. Visions led him. Now on his way across the desert four days journey from Palmyra, he felt his eyes flash.

Vision. Pain. Screams, and terror, riding down on them from out of the sun like a nightmare manifested by demons. Too late, as usual.

He curled around his saddle, knees digging into the quivering sides of the camel he was riding, as reality overtook the hell he saw in his mind. Four men, draped in fur and skin and painted blue, black, red, with spear and axe and sword, fell on the caravan of traders like a plague. His eyes cleared as he felt a wave of power hit him, not one, but several Quickenings: strong, old, malevolent.

Familiar. At least, one was.

He raised his head, eyes wide, and met cold eyes in a chiseled face smeared with blue pigment.

Then he was knocked from his camel by a spear through the chest.

He woke in a tent. A small fire burned outside, encircled by rocks that he could see through the

open flap. He could hear the sounds of a bustling camp. He brought his hand to his chest.

He was healed. He was also clean. And naked.

Except for the shackle around his right ankle. The cuff and chain were engraved with runes, strengthening the metal and utterly negating his magic. Daniyyel discovered this when he automatically reached for his magic to loosen his bonds and found... nothing. He panicked at feeling the void where there should have been power. Being cut off from his mage senses was like having his brain bound tightly in layers of wool. It itched. It felt like he was going to explode. It hurt.

A memory of a centuries-old vision flashed behind his eyes. Pain.

“Death.”

“So I am called.”

He turned his head to see his once-lover, sitting across from him, staring at him. “Adam.”

“It’s Methos, actually. Call me master.”

Daniyyel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Or?”

“Or my brothers will see how many times you can die and still wake up.”

Oh, this was not good.

His instincts proved correct. Methos had been twisted. He was cold as ice, but behind his eyes, Daniyyel could see despair. Fear.

Hunger.

The others Methos called brothers were monsters. Over the course of the days and weeks that followed, hidden in the shadows of his tent-prison and obscured from view by Methos’ magic, Daniyyel spied on them, and came to know them by their actions. Caspian was disgusting, a true animal who would as soon eat a slave as fuck it. Silas was touched in the head, a huge man who loved his axe, was kind to animals, and laughed as he chopped captives into pieces, some of which Caspian ate.

Methos was the quiet one, who spent most of his days planning the raids the band went out on, and his nights with Daniyyel, silently taking him, a hand over Daniyyel’s mouth to keep him quiet, then withdrawing and disappearing as soon as he was finished. His instincts told him Methos didn’t go far, because he could feel eyes on him, and magic obscuring him. It was a good thing, because the last of the so-called brothers was the worst.

Kronos was a demon in human form. His evil revealed itself in his love of killing and chaos, destruction and dealing out pain.

Daniyyel was absolutely certain the only thing keeping his head on his shoulders was Methos hiding his presence.

His days were long, and oddly boring, for all the fact that he was living on the razor’s edge of discovery and death. Methos eventually brought back a body slave, a witch who looked after him, and Daniyyel spent most of his time watching her. Her powers were sound-based, and her magic was weak. She never saw him through Methos’ obscuring spell. Never woke when Methos came to him and they coupled, never spoke of him to anyone. While it made for a lonely, solitary confinement for him, it also distracted Methos to an extent, and gave Daniyyel time to work on translating and breaking the runes keeping him captive.

Still, her presence was disruptive to the band. Methos didn’t share her, and that rankled the others, particularly Kronos. One night, Kronos came into their tent, startling Daniyyel so badly he almost gave himself away. Kronos demanded the witch, and Methos, as always, gave way before him. After the woman left and Kronos was no longer in sight, he came to Daniyyel and dropped down on his knees next to him.

For the first time since he was captured, Methos kissed him. There was desperation in it. When he pulled back, he brushed his hand over the shackle.

The runes gave way.

“Not yet,” Methos said quietly, then leaned down and kissed him again.

This time when he was pushed back against the blankets, he was free to touch as he was touched. It was silent as always, because Astarte knew he didn’t want any of the others to hear, especially Caspian. But it was different, more like the first time, when they both were free. There was tenderness in the hands that gripped him, gentleness when he was entered. It didn’t feel like punishment. When it was over and he lay trembling, Methos’ arms held him close until he relaxed into sleep.

He awoke to chaos. Sometime overnight the witch had stabbed Kronos, stolen his horse, and escaped. Methos and Kronos were screaming at each other, Silas bellowed like an ox with a broken leg, and Caspian gibbered at everyone. Daniyyel checked, and yes, he was still free of the chains. This was his chance. He took it, stealing some of Methos’ clothes and a long cape, a short sword, a water

skin, some dried meat stuffed in his pack, and he slipped out the back of the tent and headed for the horses.

He had one foot on the ground and was halfway up a horse when Kronos caught him.

Feeling a rush of magic for the first time in weeks, he snarled an incantation and *pushed*. Kronos staggered back, hand going to his belly as fresh blood spurted. Catching himself immediately, he hurled himself forward just as Daniyyel got himself seated and kicked the horse in the ribs. Before Kronos' outstretched hand could catch him, Methos threw himself at his 'brother' and knocked him face-first in the dirt. In the background Silas roared again, and from the sound of it, Caspian was attacking him. Any excuse for a fight, with those two.

Daniyyel risked a look back, and Methos urgently waved him on. Daniyyel took the hint and got the hell away from there as fast as his stolen horse could run.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Llwyn Bryn Dinas, a forthill settlement in Bronze Age Wales, circa 400 BCE – 200 CE

He'd done everything he could, and it wasn't enough. Methos felt like he'd been living in a daze for centuries, until he'd found Daniyyel again. Then the haze was stripped away. He could see himself. He couldn't save himself.

He could hide his lover, at least.

Things were tense, but they were always tense in a camp with a raving murderer who thought he was a god, a cannibal, a devil with a child's mind, and himself. He could hide away under the pretense of planning only so long. They thought him a prude, and too squeamish, but smart, so they kept him.

He used their preconceptions against them.

There was no way to explain it to Daniyyel, how he'd had to take him or Caspian would have gotten him, and since they were all Immortals, he would have been tortured into insanity long before he was allowed to die. Be eaten. Nothing Methos did could be worse.

Although at times it felt like it.

So he'd bound his magic, chained him in silence, hidden him the best he could. The temptation was too great at night, to take comfort, some semblance of the closeness they'd once had. To pretend that they were equals, at least there in the deepest part of night, when there were no

words. He put on a harsh front, master to slave, but they had both been slaves at different times in their lives, and he knew that Daniyyel knew the difference. It was a hard part to play, a difficult balancing act, but he did it.

Until they came across Cassandra. A magical Immortal, like them, with her first death, and Methos couldn't bring himself to kill the infant. Still, as always, it wasn't mercy on his part. He needed to get Daniyyel away, he needed to find an excuse to escape, before the illusion was broken, and one of the others found Daniyyel.

Being the only mage in the Horsemen was good, but it wasn't foolproof.

Cassandra was an opportunity, and a good one. He acted like he'd fallen in love with her, though he hadn't lain with her. Why would he when he had Daniyyel? So he let her believe he was tender with her because he had feelings for her. Then he let Kronos see his act, and the result was exactly what he expected. Cassandra was pulled into Kronos' tent, and instead of sucking him as she was ordered, she stabbed him. Then she stole a horse, and in the confusion, Methos got Daniyyel out.

It almost worked.

Unfortunately, Kronos always healed fast. He nearly caught Daniyyel, and Methos had to directly intervene. After that, there was no choice. He kicked Kronos in the wounded gut hard enough to kill him temporarily, then grabbed a horse of his own and took off. With Silas and Caspian busy trying to kill one another, Kronos groggily trying to keep his belly intact, and three escapees all going in different directions, Methos managed to pull it off.

Once he got far enough away that he couldn't feel anyone's Quickening, he circled around. Tracking by magic, he picked up Daniyyel's trail, and followed him. He had to keep him safe

They traveled for days. Daniyyel was swift but smart, using magic to cloak himself, to gather game, to hide his fire, to conjure water. Methos did the same, further back, shadowing his magic with Daniyyel's to keep his presence secret. The passage on the ship included a few close calls, but he kept hidden. It helped that he spent most of his time hanging over the side in the back while Daniyyel kept to the upper deck, immune to seasickness, the lucky bastard. Methos nearly kissed the ground when they made landfall, if he hadn't been too busy making sure Daniyyel didn't notice him.

Eventually, finally, he watched as Daniyyel found a group that would take him in. Magic, but not Immortal.

After ensuring his lover was safe with the Keltoi, Methos headed off to get as far as he could from Kronos. China was supposed to be interesting. On the eighth day, coming through the woods at the base of a fortified hilltop, he felt the glimmer of a Quickening. It wasn't complete, was a mere wisp. A pre-Immortal. He was going to avoid it, not wanting the trouble, when he heard a cry.

A baby.

It was wrapped in a cloth and left under a bush. Who left a baby under a hedge? He dropped down from his horse and crouched next to the infant. Bright green eyes, reddened from tears, stared up at him from beneath a thin black fringe. His tiny nose was reddened from the cold and he looked hungry. He opened his little mouth to cry again and Methos reached down, giving him a knuckle to gnaw on.

Sometimes, he was such a sap.

While normally, he had no trouble at all being pragmatic and placing his own survival first, he had to admit to an almost infinitesimal weakness for babies of any species. Who knows? Perhaps if he believed in the gods, he might see this as the gods' way of giving him a chance at redemption.

Ridiculous, of course. But there was more than a proto-Quickening to this babe.

There was magic.

It was strong, and had to be, as it was keeping him alive. Mind made up, Methos retrieved his finger, now dripping with slobber, and picked up the infant. He would take the foundling and raise him as his own.

China could wait.

They'd go to Greece instead.

In the ensuing years, his son and first student grew to be a fine warrior, while Methos hung out with Mencius and played philosophical word games. The boy, now man, he'd named Godric, in a nod to the probably nonexistent gods who had led Methos to him. Unsurprisingly, he grew up to be sword-mad, a skill that would serve him well over a long life. He also proved to be skilled at practical magic, though he tended to fall asleep when Methos wanted to debate theory.

Eventually, when they had knocked around Greece long enough that the lack of aging was starting to raise questions, Godric headed off to fight with

the Romans. Methos, bored and getting antsy with the feeling that Kronos was getting too close, followed. He ended up staying in Rome as Godric went wandering with the army, fighting all over the Empire.

Methos sighed over the fact that his son wanted nothing more than to spend his life as a soldier around lots of sharp pointy things. Godric laughed and headed off to pick fights with the Picts. Lots of fun to be found there!

His father was pretty sure the boy was completely mad, but at least he was enjoying himself.

~ ~ ~

Replicator Ship, 2005

Daniel could do nothing but stare as the shackles slid out from around his forearms and shins, as the columns of replicator sensors drew back from around his head. The strange currents running through the replicators messed with his magic, leaving him helpless, something he'd hated for centuries, since the first time Methos had chained him.

There would be no eleventh hour miracle to save him, this time.

He saw the psychotic robot wearing Sam's face change her right hand into a blade, and had the sudden, extreme hope that she would only gut him, not decapitate him. Although given that he was somewhere in space, he wasn't sure either his magic or his immortality would save him this time. What would life be like floating along as space junk? Probably painful.

Guess that left only one choice.

He wondered if Oma would let him back in to the clubhouse.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Belgium, circa 200 BCE

Daniyyel's wanderings brought him back near the beginning, two millennia later, not that he counted years as such until much later in his life. Still, he was starting over, again. For the first time, he would leave his name behind, as he had the desert sands of his last home. Here, in the lush forest, in the shadows of a new religion, it was time for a new persona.

Mysterious figures gathered around a fire, chanting in a language he found fluid and lovely. The stories were familiar, new names to old deeds, but he felt no others like himself in the group. Mages, yes, with a wild green magic that hummed

to him, but no Immortals. Here, he could find a new place.

Here, he could be safe.

As always inconveniently timed, a vision struck him as he hid in the trees, spying on the people who would one day be known as Druids. A brief respite, a stay before tragedy. Honor. Justice. Courage. A time to learn, and a time to heal. Old faces made new, love to pain, fullness to loss, a circle never-ending.

When he could see again, an old man dressed in brown and green was staring down at him. "Welcome, Dreamer."

Thus was Rowan the Raven born.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Alexandria, 415 CE

At one time, Rowan would not have followed his visions. But three and a half centuries before, he'd had one that actually gave him enough warning to escape as the Romans destroyed the Druids. He'd fought as long as he could, but he knew an ending when he saw one.

He'd gone back to wandering, ever on the lookout for new things to learn. Then he'd come across something exciting.

Writing.

Learning *that* lead to reading.

Now he followed the words, and those from whom they fell.

They led to Alexandria. He's always loved philosophy, wondering why, seeking answers for the unanswerable. He loved to learn, from anyone and everyone, but sometimes a truly incredible teacher came along. When that happened, he would circle, like a ship in a tempest, content to see where it led him.

Hypatia was a wonder. Mathematics, astronomy, the intricacy of the skies and the beauty of symmetry. She taught him, and any who would learn, of Iamblichus' reality and the Platonian complexities beyond human understanding.

For a mage who had lived for centuries and never stopped seeking answers, she was a gift from the gods.

Late one afternoon, heading home after dinner, Rowan felt a nudge at his Quickening. It tingled, bringing with it a sound like a small boy's laughter caught on the wind. Never one to take chances when it came to his head, he slipped around

the corner, threw up an imperturbable shield to keep normal eyes from seeing what was to come, dropping his hand to the hilt of his sword. There, leaning against the side of a building, a tall, lean figure topped with a wild head of dark hair over a Roman nose and bright eyes the color of fall leaves.

"Hello, Daniyyel."

His voice hadn't changed, still low, still made his skin prickle. For a moment, hatred ran through him. Nights of being chained like an animal. Magic bound, a rough cloth between his teeth, Methos' warmth searing him, invading him, smothering him. But the hatred was tattered, holes ripped in it from memories of moments within the madness. A soft touch in the darkness, swift, stolen. The fear he felt, reflected in otherwise cold, dead eyes. The sadness underneath the fear. Each in his own way, they had both been trapped. He had escaped, and as much as Methos was responsible for his captivity, so, too, was he responsible for his chance at freedom.

Forever was a very long time. He could hate, or he could understand, and move on.

"It's Rowan, now."

"Like the tree?"

"It's a Druid thing," he shrugged. Waved his hand, ending in a downward slash, and tugged Methos toward him by the belt.

"Is this a hint?" Definite interest, and outright laughter, in that voice. Beneath the laughter there was relief.

"I have beer, too."

Before he could blink, Rowan found himself pinned to the wall. Kissed quite enthusiastically.

"Where?"

Well, that was easy. Considering the last time they'd met, he'd been a slave and Methos had been Death. They had some talking to do.

Later.

For that moment, there were different touches. Still a little rough, but with more tenderness when hands stroked over skin. The kisses remained fierce, but they softened as they lengthened, until they were given as well as taken. No shouts were muffled, this time, and when they curled together, Methos' long legs wrapped firmly around his waist, they faced each other. Watched each other's eyes as they came together, and flew apart. When the tension released, they remained close, sharing tiny bites and licks and tastes.

This time when they lay together afterward, the silence was calm.

Methos proved to be just as interested in the scrolls as Rowan was. The days blended into one another, as they learned, as they challenged and debated through the day and lie together through the night. It was easy to get caught up in the heady atmosphere, easy to fall into the realm of logic and reasoning. All too easy to dismiss the politics that surrounded them, the pettiness and the ignorance disguised as faith, used to whip up the minds of the jealous and the confused.

They were coming back to the Library after a meal when they heard the mob. Men, no women, no children, a few youths, but mostly men old enough to hold clubs, sickles, torches. Methos pulled Rowan out of the path of the chanting, howling mob, throwing a quick obscurity charm up to keep them out of whatever trouble was brewing this time.

Until they saw her.

Near the front of the mob, being dragged by her hair, by an arm, kicked and struck with their rough weapons. Her clothing was torn to the point where most of her skin was showing, what could be seen beneath the dirt and the blood. Her eyes were open, but the warmth and light that had always been there was gone.

Intellectually, Rowan knew Hypatia was dead. Instinctively, he moved to save her.

Methos' arms wrapped around him like chains.

It was a bad association in his memory. He fought, forgetting his magic, forgetting himself, forgetting his lover. All he saw was his teacher and the ignorant bastards who had murdered her. He wanted to kill them. He wanted their blood to run in the streets as hers was.

"Yes, I know. I do too. But it's too late, love."

The words made no sense to him.

"There are too many of them. She's gone."

"Let me go!" He didn't recognize his own voice, didn't realize he'd been speaking aloud the whole time. His word were ragged, low, like an animal caught in a trap.

"If I let you go, they will simply tear you apart as well. I cannot have that."

A whisper in a language he didn't recognize, and everything went black.

When he awoke, they were in their quarters. He lay, covered in blankets, tucked on their pallet.

Methos sat on a stool beside him, watching him somberly.

There was an explanation, of course. Methos was always exceptional at reading the political climate, making sense of idiocy, knowing exactly what plots were ongoing. His teacher had been the friend of one politician, the Christians had been led by another, and Hypatia was a symbol who needed to be destroyed to further one man's agenda over the other's.

He didn't care.

He levered his tired body to a sitting position and stared out the window. The mob was still there, celebrating their great victory, dozens of men against a single unarmed woman. Such bravery. Such heroes.

Such fools.

Abruptly, he was sick of it. Sick of the idiots surrounding him, sick of himself for not being of any use to his mentor, sick of Methos for holding him back. He knew, vaguely, that one day he would appreciate his lover's pragmatism, but right then, all he wanted to do was gut him.

Without a word, he threw the blankets aside and pulled on his sandals. Reached for his pack. Shouldered Methos out of the doorway and walked away.

"Be safe," he heard from behind him.

"You too," he muttered, then took the first turn away from the crowds, and left the city.

He felt Methos' Quickening in the distance for a few weeks, always at the furthest edge of his awareness. Keeping an eye on him, making sure no one snuck up on him and took his head while he grieved, trying to put his mind and emotions in some sort of order. It was reassuring, and irritating, and so wholly Methos.

Rowan ignored him and continued on his trek.

~ ~ ~

London, 2005

Rupert Giles stared at the computer screen, wishing for the millionth time that he had some form of magic that worked with the infernal machine. The latest reports from Africa were encouraging, but the reports out of Canada and Korea were concerning. The issue was that, while there were now more than enough Slayers to deal with paranormal and supernatural threats, the Watchers were spread so thin as to be transparent.

He sipped his tea, grimaced at the floating bits of twig on the top, and paused to curse their latest hedge-witch's obsession with herbals. This brew was supposed to help with mental clarity and combat fatigue. He couldn't help but think that it tasted worse than some of the potions he'd been forced to ingest at Hogwarts.

Overall, though, things were going well. It was a bit strange to consider that he was now the Grand Old Man of the Watchers, but given that they were essentially Andrew, Xander, and himself, that wasn't saying much. The boys, well, men really, were doing quite well, acting independently and seldom needing to come to him for advice. He felt rather as he had when he'd first been fired after Buffy's coming-of-age. He'd be feeling left behind, if he wasn't drowning in paperwork.

God, he loathed paperwork.

No, the problems weren't coming from the Slayers, or the Covens, who were working quite well together. Not from Los Angeles, which had settled some since the latest Apocalypse, nor the street gangs who had sprung up, much like young Gunn's, all over the world. People would look after their own, after all. Every Slayer had her own Scoobies, as Buffy would say.

The problems were more whispers, really. He'd always kept an ear open to his home grounds, needing to know what was happening in the British Wizarding world. He could never really leave it. The nineties had been awful, what with Voldemort's resurrection, and all the travails that poor Potter child had to go through. He'd been busy himself, preparing for Buffy, dealing with the insanity that came from being her Watcher, and had kept his distance.

One would think, with all they'd been through, that those in charge would learn from their mistakes, particularly as the winners had been the moderate progressives and not the pureblood bigots. But tradition, money, and influence-peddling survived anything, much like cockroaches, and the rumors coming from England were becoming increasingly concerning.

Malfoy really should have gone through the veil. He was a slimy bastard as a child, and he'd only gotten slimier. Giles still didn't know how the man twisted himself out of trouble, and now his son was following in his footsteps. All that blood shed, all those lives lost. Yet nothing changed.

"What's with the long face, Head man?" Oz's mellow voice behind him gave him an excuse to stop poking at the laptop and push away from his desk.

"I'm getting too old for this, I'm afraid. It's all starting to blend together."

Oz nodded wisely. "Sacrilege," he informed him. "You're only as old as you feel."

Given that he could claim centuries, Giles barely managed to hold back a snort. "I'm ancient, then."

Oz grinned at him, a sliver of teeth and cheer, then came over to perch on the corner of his desk. He peered at him, and it felt to Giles like his soul was being read. "What's up?"

Giles settled back in his chair. "It's nothing, really."

Another stare, and he sighed. "Just... some people I used to know. I may have to take a little sabbatical. I think trouble is coming. May be already here."

"People?" Oz asked, concerned. "Like Ethan people?"

"Well," Giles cleared his throat. "Magical. Not so much like Ethan. Not many are." He coughed slightly. "Mercifully."

Before Oz could respond, a bright light grew in the room, quickly, until neither man could see. Strangely, it felt warm, friendly, not alarming at all.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Kent, 457 CE

The battle was pure chaos, as they always were. Swords flashing everywhere, blood flying, body parts being hacked off. The stench of guts and corpses trampled into the mud. Men crushed and maimed and mutilated, all in the name of glory.

Hurrah.

Hengest, called the Hellhound, knew nothing different. He fought as he always had, with sword and fist and magic, giving everything he had for his liege lord. Foes blurred into a wall of duty, exhaustion, and victory. At one point, his sword crossed that of a young man, vivid green eyes in a filthy face, meeting his with the light of battle gleaming in them. His armor was scored and stained, he'd lost his helm and his black hair stood in all directions. He moved as though he'd been born to combat, and for the length of that fight, Hengest enjoyed himself. The other man was also a mage, and a skilled one, as skilled with the blade as he was with magic.

But not all battles went to the strongest, or the most skilled. Sometimes it was luck, and sometimes that luck was bad.

His opponent's foot came down in the wrong place, slipped as the severed arm it landed on rolled, and Hengest took his strike. Up the side, under the ribs, into the heart, and back out. For a moment they were face to face, as intimate as warfare could be, and he saw the light die in those bright green eyes.

"Shit," the man murmured as he faded from life, sounding more disgruntled than anything. Hengest found himself smiling, even as he laid the cooling corpse down with more care than he usually showed.

Then it was back into the fray, the odd moment of connection lost in the swirl of strikes and shielding, parrying and slashing. Eventually he fought the leader of his opponents. Vortigern was a strong warrior, and Hengest gave it his all. But it had been a long battle, and he was weary. This time, the bad luck was his. The sword entered the side of his abdomen and slashed up, catching on his armor, before being ripped away. The pain was unimaginable, for a time that felt like forever. He dropped his sword, his hands curled around his stomach, holding in his guts, feeling the warm blood spurt through his fingers. Then he was cold, and it was dark, and it was over.

Until it wasn't.

To his complete shock, he woke up.

"Welcome back," a light baritone voice came from above him.

The man with the green eyes and the wild hair stood there, holding out a hand to help him up.

Stunned, Hengest took it, levering himself up from the clinging muck, a combination of mud, blood, and other things too disgusting to mention. He gingerly felt under his armor.

He was sure he'd had his guts ripped out.

"Wha?" he sputtered.

The other man laughed. "First death's a bit of a shock, isn't it? My name's Godric, by the way."

"Godric?" he repeated stupidly. It felt like his brain had died.

"Yeah. What's your name?"

"Hengest," he automatically responded.

"The Hellhound?"

Oh, he'd heard of him. How nice. "What the bloody fucking hell is going on?"

"Let's get cleaned up, and I'll tell you all about it."

Hengest gave a thought to standing his ground and demanding an explanation, but considering he was sinking in muck up past his ankles, a wash and something fiery to drink sounded good.

After obtaining both, he sat huddled under a blanket next to a fire, his hands wrapped around a mug of hot mead, while his new friend Godric told him a strange and bizarre tale that would become his life. It seemed there were such a thing as Immortals, and he was one. They could die, but would regain life, unless they were beheaded. At that time, whomsoever took their head, took also their life force, called a Quickening. Some Immortals hunted others, and some refused to play the game. Godric was a soldier, and had been for centuries. Hengest, it now seemed, was his student.

"Teach your grandmother to suck eggs," was Hengest's immediate reply.

After Godric stopped laughing, he explained that there was more to being an Immortal than just coming back to life. He was willing to teach Hengest, if Hengest, in turn, would teach Godric.

Hengest the Hellhound was a famed battlemage, after all, and Godric loved to fight.

Thus began a few of the most frustrating (for Hengest) and entertaining (for Godric) decades for the two.

Oh, life continued, of course. Hengest went on to become the first King of Kent, with Godric as his strong right hand. He adopted a son, taught him what he needed to know to thrive, and shoved the crown off on him as quickly as possible. Then he gave Aesc a manly hug, told him to make his father proud, and rode off into the sunset with Godric.

Several months of traveling, bickering, taking a head when absolutely necessary, dragging Godric away from the ladies, and dragging himself away from the arcane magics they found along the way, they ended up somewhere by the sea. Coming upon a stone forthouse, Hengest felt a strange, deep Quickening. It seeped into his bones, surrounded him with the sound of a small boy's laughter, made his hand itch for his blade. Godric grinned at him like a loon, and hailed the house.

The man who came out to greet them looked younger than himself, but held the weight of ages in his eyes. He was tall and slender to the point of skinniness, but his shoulders were broad, his legs looked strong, his hands were made for a sword. He angled his jaw at them and gave Godric an affectionate, disgruntled look.

"What's this, then?"

Hengest might have felt insulted, if his spine wasn't still trying to curl into a ball.

Then Godric spoke up. "He followed me home. Can I keep him?"

His hand lashed out and smacked the idiot alongside the head. He sputtered, and Godric laughed like a hyena.

Introductions followed. The man, Methos, was as cracked as his son Godric, but there was a ferocity barely underlying his eyes that kept Hengest wary.

Regardless of Godric's desire to keep him, it wasn't many months before Hengest left to return to Jutland. Alone.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Gaul, circa 600 CE

Godric seldom, if ever, ran from a fight. Methos ran from them habitually... there was a reason he'd lived so long, and while he could fight, and incredibly well, he didn't like it. But this time they were both running like rabbits.

A Gaul warrior the size of a bear, suffering from the effects of a Dark Quickening, was a nightmare. No sane Immortal fought a nightmare. Not to mention how taking a Dark Quickening would completely fuck one up.

Godric's senses were all over the place, the stench of the evil Quickening overpowering his own ability to sense Immortals and confusing his magic. Methos kept his silence, but his hand was hard on his son's shoulder as he hurried him through the woods. Every time Godric opened his mouth to ask, Methos shook his head sharply.

Finally, they saw buildings, and Godric made to run for safety. Of course, that was the moment Methos froze in place. Godric nearly ended up flat on his face when his father didn't move.

Then Methos smiled, and stared at a man coming out from a building.

Another Immortal, definitely. This one in a monk's habit. He had long, shaggy brown hair, bright blue eyes with the slightest squint, and a sturdy build, with long legs and strong arms that looked useful in a fight. Methos dragged him over to the man and smirked.

The man raised a brow.

Godric opened his mouth to ask who he was, when Methos leaned forward and kissed the man. Like he was dying of hunger and the man's mouth was a feast.

Oh. He'd heard stories.

"Rowan?" he guessed.

When the man got his mouth back, giving Methos a long-suffering look, he glanced over at Godric and smiled. "Yes. Godric, I presume?"

"Nice to meet you," Godric barely got out, before Methos clapped his hands and interrupted. "All well and good, so glad we're all getting along, there's a monster with a Dark Quickening on our heels. Think you can help?"

The now-identified Rowan slapped Methos on the chest with one hand, grabbed Godric's near shoulder with the other, and pulled them both inside the Sanctuary.

The trap was set, and sprung. The Gaul came in roaring like a beast. Either there were no other monks around, or they had sense enough to hide. Methos pulled Godric into an opening in the wall, hiding them in shadows, as Rowan stepped forward.

The Gaul spotted him, and ran forward. Rowan held up a hand, there was a flash of magic, and their surroundings changed.

Godric caught his breath. This Rowan was an accomplished mage! He'd barely felt the translocation.

They were deeper in the Sanctuary now, surrounded by stone walls. The air was damp, with an oddly expectant feel. Next to him, Methos leaned forward, watching intently. To the right, Rowan stood, unarmed but for his magic, beside a still pool with deep green water. He spoke to the Gaul, his words too low for Godric to make them out.

Then the Gaul lunged.

Methos twitched, but held his place, still watching. Godric took his cue from his father, and held his peace.

Rowan dodged fluidly, and the Gaul fell past him, directly into the pool.

As soon as the maddened Immortal touched the water, a light grew. Where it touched his body, it was as golden as sunlight, while where his sword landed, it was silver. Mist rose from the surface of the water, and the Gaul froze in place.

As he stood, the water rose about him, then gently fell back. A cut appeared on his chest, then another over his eye. One more, to his upper arm. Then the mist faded away, and the Gaul folded into the water. He stared at his sword as if he had never seen it.

Then he began to sob.

Rowan backed away, coming to join them, as two monks came out of the shadows and walked to the edge of the pool.

“They have him now,” Rowan said quietly.

“Will he be all right?” Godric asked.

“If he’s strong enough.”

They didn’t speak as Rowan led them out of a maze of corridors back to the courtyard outside the Sanctuary. Godric sat on a nearby bench while Methos paced. Moments later, they felt it.

The Quickening. Not dark, now, but still discordant. Grief, madness, and rage.

All three turned, but Rowan was closest to the entryway. The Gaul came tearing out, sword raised high. Rowan lashed out with one hand, magic flying out to impede the oncoming beast. Methos whistled, a brief note calling Rowan’s attention, then tossed his sword to him. Rowan caught it and turned, meeting the blow that came as the Gaul shook off the magic.

The fight that followed was brutal. The Gaul had no finesse but immense strength. He was slow, but if a single blow connected, Rowan would have no chance of survival. Rowan moved like water, using his blade and his magic interwoven, getting in several small cuts that barely slowed the behemoth down.

Beside him, Godric could feel how tense Methos was. Rowan may not win the fight, but if he lost, the Gaul would not be long for the world.

Unfortunately, the warrior was too far into his blood-madness to care. He pressed harder and harder, until he had worn Rowan down to the point where he faltered under a two-handed slash. Then Rowan appeared to collapse, hissed something in a language Godric had never heard, and with a flash of deep blue light, knocked the Gaul back on his heels. Rowan rolled to the side then came up to one knee, threw his arm out, and used his entire body to power his strike, as his sword swept to the side and back.

The wind died, there was silence for a bare moment, then the storm hit.

Methos pulled Godric back into the shelter of the stone building, not that he needed much encouragement. From the entry he could see the body of the Gaul, his head now an arm-span away on the ground. Tendrils of white lightning surrounded the corpse, picking up speed, swirling out in a vortex, now with Rowan at its center.

Rowan’s back arched, his limbs spasmed. He dropped his sword, and his head fell back. His eyes widened and his mouth opened in a soundless scream.

The strength of the Quickening lifted him from the ground, as lightning flashed through his body, striking it again and again. When it finally died down, Rowan was curled up like a child on the burnt grass, his arms crossing his chest, his shoulders hunched. He stared vacantly into the distance and panted for breath.

“What was that?”

Methos looked at Godric like he was a simpleton. Godric huffed. “The spell? I know what a Quickening is. I just hope it wasn’t dark. I’d hate to have to wrestle him over and toss him in the spring.”

Methos shook his head. “Sumerian. He has been doing his homework! And no, he’ll be fine. A Dark Quickening is literally that. The power is dark, not light.”

He moved forward, Godric trailing behind him, and knelt at Rowan’s side. He brushed the sweaty hair away from the dazed blue eyes and ran a hand down his back, over and over. Godric recognized the soothing motions from the many times his father had done the same for him. Once Rowan was back to himself, they slowly walked back to the Sanctuary.

“Will they have a problem with us?” Methos asked.

It took a moment for Godric to understand what he was asking, then he blushed.

As it turned out, the monks had no problems with Methos and Rowan. However, they often reprimanded Godric. Apparently, he was a loud disturbance who cut down too many trees.

Well, he had to do something while the old men were sequestered doing things he didn’t want to think about!

One night, near time for them to leave holy ground, they sat at dinner and discussed possible destinations. Godric had been a soldier for centuries, used to going where he was told, and had no great preference. Methos had some Immortals he was avoiding – some lunatic called Kronos, among others – and, since Rowan had been a wanderer for a long time, was leaving it up to his lover to choose. Rowan shredded a roll and took a deep breath.

What he said surprised Godric. He wanted to start a school. For mages.

“Here?” Methos asked, looking askance at the empty forest and grim monks shooting them – mainly Godric – dark looks.

“No,” Rowan replied, “In Alba.”

Godric looked on with interest as Methos grinned. “You know, I know a guy...”

flashback: Alba, circa 781 CE

For once, Godric wasn't looking for a fight. His father Methos, and his new father, Rowan, were scouting out locations for the school. There was an old Immortal with an amazing library in a castle by a large lake, next to a forest. He called himself Emrys, and he'd greeted Rowan like a long-lost son.

Turns out the guy Methos knew was also the guy Rowan knew, and neither one of them knew it.

So he left Methos yapping with Emrys and Rowan immersed in the library while he went out and got some exercise. He fought with a couple centaurs in the forest, strictly for fun, of course, but eventually that got boring. So he took a horse and wandered a bit.

Right into a Viking raiding party.

To be fair, a pretty maid had distracted him, not an uncommon occurrence. Then she screamed. He wondered what he'd done wrong when that line had worked so often in the past, then ducked when his instincts told him to. Unfortunately, the maid took the blow, and ended up in two parts on the ground.

That ticked him off. She'd been an innocent. They'd been aiming for him.

The bastard who'd killed her was dead before he drew his next breath. A blade across the throat, impetus aided with a magical push, did that. Godric continued the turn that had ended the Viking's life only to see a few more enemy than he usually liked to cross.

Especially since he was still trying to get his trows fastened.

She'd been a very pretty maid.

Still, he did his best, which was pretty damned good. He was distracted for a moment by the feeling of a familiar Quickening, and immediately fought harder. He couldn't trust Vikings not to behead him, and with their own Immortal, probably leading them, he had no chance of keeping his head unless he won.

Which, pressed by nearly a score of battle-hardened, berserker Vikings, looked to be a challenge.

They were on the point of overwhelming him by sheer numbers when he heard a muttered, “Well, fuck it all,” to the side. Then one of their own, his face obscured by greying brown curls and his helm, flanked the raiders and began mowing them down.

Seeing help decide to pitch in energized Godric, and he was able to take out the four that were holding him down. By the time he killed the last of them, Hengest the Hellhound stood in front of him in all his bloody, grumpy glory.

“I had ‘em!” Godric beamed at him.

Hengest smacked him on the head with the flat of his sword.

“Ow.”

“Come on, then,” Hengest hauled him up by the arm. Godric rotated it once to make sure it was still in the socket.

“Where are we going?”

“Wherever you came from, lad.”

If possible, Godric's grin widened. “You're coming with me?”

Godric shrugged, finished cleaning his blade on the torn cloak of one of his dead erstwhile companions, and nodded. “No matter how old ye are, ye still can't look after yerself,” he sighed.

Hengest got the horse, on account of he'd been raiding and was tired. Godric's protest that he'd just been in a terrible fight for his life won him no points, and he gave in with a laugh, leading the way on foot. As they headed to the castle, they caught up.

“So what have you been up to?” from Godric.

“Conquering Jutland. Got bored. Went raiding.”

Nearly four hundred years in six words. That was the usual from Hengest. Godric glanced over his shoulder, a wicked gleam in his eye.

“We've been busy!”

The rest of the walk was spent filling him in on everything that had happened since they'd last met, finishing up with the plans he and his fathers had for starting a school for mages. He didn't notice that Hengest only woke up when he got to the last part.

“A school? Sounds interesting.”

When they turned up at the castle, it was dinner. Rowan, Methos and Emrys were sitting down to table when Godric came in, half-dragging Hengest.

“You look like you’ve been dragged backward through a hedge,” Methos remarked. His eyes narrowed. “Both of you.”

“Are you all right?” Rowan asked, concerned. Such a worry wart. It was adorable. Godric grinned at them all, then turned to Methos.

“He followed me home again...”

~ ~ ~

flashback: Scotland, Hogwarts Castle, circa 987 CE

After a few decades of reciprocal learning, Emrys told them they could have the castle, as it was time for him to ‘begin the cycle’. He didn’t explain what that meant.

He didn’t explain a lot of things, but by then they were all used to it.

Outside the castle walls, the war with the Norsemen was heating up. Further south, it was getting particularly difficult, and it made Rowan happier that he’d chosen Alba. The most they had to deal with here were raiders, hostile non-magicals, bandits, the occasional Immortal hunter, a few mouthy priests, unruly centaurs (though Godric had fun with them), brutal winters, random overflights by dragons, and overly-helpful house elves. Still, everything was falling into place.

Each had their strength. Rowan and Methos were true scholars, Methos being strongest in soul magic. He was also the best strategist of them all, and busily planned for every eventuality under the sun, to keep the school safe and running for at least a couple millennia. Rowan thought he looked a bit like he had as a Horseman, with all his planning, only happy, and without the underlying terror, desperation, and madness.

Kronos didn’t like the cold, apparently, for which they both were thankful.

Rowan himself took on the library, sorting and making it usable and accessible to a variety of levels of scholarship, from neophyte to master. His visions came regularly, mostly benign, and he huddled with Methos to give him insight on what possibilities they might encounter in the future. His own strength was in Mind Magics, including occlumency, legilimency, divination, and the emotions. He was also strongest in theory, as Methos tended to find (or make) short cuts.

This led Rowan to work with Hengest quite often, as the quiet Hellhound was the most practical among them, and was busily, if somewhat crankily, sorting out the curriculum. There had never been an attempt quite like this, as mages had always been taught by Masters before, so there was a lot of work to do.

As much as he complained under his breath, he enjoyed himself.

Godric got bored often, but that was fine, as he was in charge of physical security, which gave him the opportunity to go out every day and play with the centaurs... er, patrol the perimeter. He often met raiders and killed them. He also began to scout out the local villages, what few there were, for budding magical talent. When he was at the castle, he sparred with anyone who would cross swords with him, and as a last resort, when no one else would keep him occupied, he displayed his strengths in the practical application of magic. Essentially, he was their healer and he also did the majority of the building upkeep and expansion.

With the four working together, it was only a decade or so before they were ready to open the doors to students.

One afternoon, when most of the preparatory work was done and even Godric was too tired to move, they sat drinking mead, lazily eating, and tossing around ideas. They’d come up with the idea of houses, a remnant of the apprenticeship system, to give the students a nominal Master they could turn to in times of need, though they would all be sharing the students. Now they needed what Hengest called the fripperies... symbols, colors, devices.

Rowan wanted a tree, unsurprisingly, being a Druid among other things. He was voted down.

Methos decided on snakes, surprising no one. What did cause a moment of silence was when he announced his new pseudonym. They were nothing new, as he changed his name every time he changed his location, but this one was hilarious.

“Slithering? A slithering snake!” Godric laughed so hard he nearly spilled his mead.

Methos gave him the stink eye. “What’s wrong with puns?”

“Lowest form of humor,” Rowan told him for what must have been the thousandth time... that year. Methos had a strange sense of humor.

“Slytherin,” Hengest announced.

Methos looked askance at him and nodded, slowly. "That's what I said."

Hengest shook his head and pronounced it slowly. "Sly-the-rin. Sounds close enough to 'slithering' to get it across without embarrassing any students you happen to get."

That drew nods, even if Methos' was reluctant. The man loved his puns.

"Sal!" Godric exclaimed, and they all looked at him. "Well, slithering isn't much of a name, really."

"True," Rowan said, wincing when Methos glared at him. "It's a verb, not a noun." The table groaned. "No, really. You need an actual name, then use slithering as a descriptor."

After much discussion and another several rounds of mead, Salazar the Slytherin was born.

Rowan kept his name, as did Hengest and Godric, though Methos had his revenge when he dubbed him 'the Raven's Claw.' Godric barely got out of an even worse moniker when he latched on to the gryphon he'd ridden the week before (on the dare of a centaur, but it had been fun!). So then came Godric the Gryphon.

Hengest remained the Hellhound, and threatened to thrash anyone who tried to name him anything different.

They got their revenge later. When their castle banners were created, each had a symbol evident in their names. Methos liked his snake, Godric was puffed up over his gryphon, and Rowan reluctantly accepted his raven.

The badger was Godric's idea, of course, as badgers were both fierce and curmudgeonly. After he accepted his arse-kicking for it, Hengest let it slide.

The next six decades were an amazing adventure of a completely different kind than any they had lived before, all too short a period in an Immortal lifespan.

Sadly, the times were against them.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Outside the castle walls, Hogwarts, 1034 CE

The enemy of my enemy is my ally. Never had that held more true than it did now.

It had been hard enough to convince the hidebound traditionalists that a school would not displace them as Masters and would, in fact, take

care of all the preliminary education most of them couldn't be bothered to give. Thus giving them more advanced apprentices.

The children born of non-magicals were another thing. The unwanted, the majority of such children, were rescued. But as time passed, a few children had families who considered them blessed rather than cursed. These families lived in villages, however, that were run by the Church.

The four founders did what they had to do to protect their students.

Godric, as always, was Master of the castle protections, and even with his duties to their students, made regular patrols of the castle perimeter. Hengest patrolled a little, and Methos more, but Rowan and Hengest were the fallback protectors, those who would ensure the castle remained secure against all comers. Methos and Godric grew, if anything, even more close as they rode together, fighting raiders and villagers and a mad priest or six.

The day it all fell apart, Methos had been busy with Rowan, working on the castle wards and sneaking off into dark corners to cop a feel – or a bit more. Rowan was laughing and trying to keep his robe from getting rucked up around his waist when they both felt it.

A Quickening.

Godric!

They teleported to the front of the castle, straining to see where the fighting was. They could hear it. Hengest met them there, a quill caught in his robe, his sword already drawn, eyes sweeping the horizon.

"There," Methos barked, honing in on his son's presence. Rowan grabbed his arm and Hengest barely got a hand on his shoulder before he relocated all three of them.

They appeared in the middle of a nightmare.

For once, it wasn't villagers or priests. The bodies of the raiders made it clear exactly how Godric had died. But that hadn't loosed his Quickening.

No, he'd had the terrible luck to return to life surrounded by mortal wizards. Necromancy was only practiced in secret, as Methos well knew, and was shunned by most mages. They considered it a sign of true evil, and when they saw the man inhale after taking a mortal blow, they went insane.

They fell on the newly-arisen Immortal like a pack of wolves, tearing him to pieces. For Rowan, the

horror of seeing his foster son's body ripped apart was compounded by memories of seeing the same happen to his mentor Hypatia. For Hengest, he was thrown back to the worst depravities he'd witnessed when he'd run with a Viking raiding crew. But for Methos, it was the most horrifying.

This was his son, the boy he had raised from infancy.

His first, and still finest, student.

Yes, his body was being desecrated as Hypatia's had been... and as Methos himself, as Death, had done to a few Immortals when he had ridden with the Horsemen.

If finding Godric was his redemption, then surely losing him like this was his punishment.

He didn't realize he screamed as he tried to run toward the crowd. Hengest anchored himself in the turf and wrapped both strong arms around Methos' waist, keeping him from running into the mob. These mages knew Godric was his son. They would tear Methos asunder as they had Godric. There were too many to fight.

Rowan planted himself in front of Methos, partly to stop him, partly to shield him. Methos saw the tears on his lover's face, the anguish in his eyes, and they meant nothing.

That was his SON.

Godric's Quickening dissipated into the earth, too far away, too dispersed, for any of them to carry it. Had Methos been in his right mind, he would have appreciated that. If a Quickening from a mage was not taken by another Immortal, there was the chance it might, over time, reform into a new Immortal. But he wasn't in his right mind.

Rowan held Methos' head, one hand wrapped around the back of his skull, the other clamped over his mouth to keep him silent, until the mob broke up. It didn't take long, as the superstitious mages considered themselves on cursed ground where a necromantic ritual had taken place. When they were clear, Hengest finally let go. Rowan drew his hands away, and Methos punched him in the face.

Hengest responded immediately by clouting him on the head. Rowan held up his hands, gesturing for Hengest to back down. Methos snarled wordlessly at both of them, and walked slowly to the remains of his son.

It was the work of hours to find all of him. To gather the pieces and gently lay them, to build the pyre, to set it alight. As the time went by, Rowan and Hengest helped where they could, where he

allowed them. At the end, Rowan stood at Methos' right shoulder, and Hengest at his left, as they watched the end of Godric's shell and prayed, in their own ways and to their own gods, for his safe passage, wherever it might lead.

Rowan honestly expected Methos to leave. He didn't. For the next several months, he stayed. He taught, though there was a distance between him and the children that hadn't been there before. He came to their chamber most nights, but he was cold, and nothing Rowan could do would warm him up. His disagreements with Hengest became arguments, and they had a sharp and bitter undertone to them. Then one morning Rowan woke to a cold bed.

Methos was gone.

From Hogwarts, at least. With the coming summer, they learned what had distracted him so in the months before he left them.

He had been planning.

Infiltration, assassination, utter destruction. It was played over and over against the Masters and apprentices that had participated in the mob that murdered Godric. Hengest said nothing, made no indication each time the news came in, that he had any idea it was Methos' doing. Neither did Rowan.

If he'd asked, they would have helped.

For the next score years, Rowan remained at Hogwarts. His students were the saving of his soul, and Hengest the saving of his sanity. But he felt the distance growing in him, as well. Without Godric's humor and enthusiasm, without Methos' creativity and sheer presence, wanderlust was taking him over again. In time, it became too much, and not even his dream could keep him.

What was a dream, without his lover and his son?

"This is it, then," Hengest said, leaning against the door jamb, watching him put together a small pack.

Rowan nodded. His books would stay, forming the nucleus of what would in time be the most complete library of magic outside Alexandria. He sat back on his haunches and looked up at Hengest.

"Thank you," he said softly.

The Hellhound shook his head. "Get."

Rowan smiled, hefted his pack, and walked out to the stables. Hengest kept pace with him. The silence was filled with understanding, underlined with grumpy patience, for it was Hengest, after all.

He mounted up and turned to leave. Hengest stopped him with a hand on his knee.

“It’s home. Don’t be gone forever, eh?”

Rowan nodded, his throat too tight to speak. For once, Hengest had the words and Rowan held his peace.

~ ~ ~

Hengest watched as the last of those he could call his friends rode away from him. It was ever thus. Somebody has a big idea, makes a big mess, and leaves the Jute to clean it up. He shook his head and stomped back to the castle, covering his sense of loss with familiar irritation.

Work to be done. Never ended.

It was another forty years before he felt the castle was secure, the students were safe, and the faculty he’d brought in could cope. The majority of the raids were done, the local area either beaten, appeased, or set under a security spell. The wards were as strong as he could make them, working off his friends’ genius. By that time he had a daughter, an orphan mage who’d been abandoned as a small child upon her first accidental magic. He’d fought off the men who’d chased the girl, taken her back to Hogwarts, and raised her well. Now his Helga would take his place, leading the school into the future.

He’d had enough.

He wandered south, tired of the cold, and eventually found himself in the wilds of Africa. The magic there was different, and he learned new things every year. One day, he stumbled across a young girl who reminded him of Helga, only she wasn’t magical. Wasn’t Immortal. Yet she was fighting off demons with the strength of a dozen men.

Hengest didn’t interfere. The battle was too close, and she didn’t need the help. When the last demon fell, she turned to him and raised her wooden spear.

He smiled. Laid his short sword down, and gestured for her to take it.

After staring at him so fiercely he wondered if she could read his soul, she eased forward and picked up the blade. After watching her make a few experimental slashes, he drew his own sword. She instantly stiffened into a protective stance.

Maintaining enough distance to show he was not a threat, he began to run through some training stances. A few repetitions later, she hesitantly began to mirror his actions. He smiled, and kept

moving. Soon, she was moving nearly as smoothly as he.

He had another student. A reason to stop wandering. Someone to protect.

As it turned out, the Slayer didn’t need much protection. But she did need someone to watch over her, and so Hengest found another calling. As a Watcher.

~ ~ ~

flashback: Heidelberg, Germany, 1458

It had been a few centuries since the last time he’d felt that Quickening. Methos stopped at the tollhouse before urging his horse across the bridge. The University of Heidelberg was beautiful, a collection of buildings at the base of rolling green hills. The central fortress stood above the town atop a small hill, separated from the Church and the houses. He turned toward the main hall and followed his instincts.

The library. Of course. Rowan was waiting there, in the stacks, not even pretending to read the book in his hands.

For a moment, memory overlay the present. It was Alexandria, over a thousand years ago, not at the end, but at the beginning. How Daniyyel, now Rowan, had the courage to face him after being Death’s captive. It was Gaul, eight hundred years ago, and forgiveness in the kiss of a monk. This time, it was Rowan needing the forgiveness, for saving Methos, and Methos needing acceptance, after running away.

Rowan put the book on the table without losing eye contact. Methos moved forward as if pulled by a magnet.

What this man did to him. Every time.

He cupped Rowan’s cheek and stared into the shadowed blue eyes. Never as bright as they had been, couldn’t be, with all they’d lived through. But still that spark lingered, that hunger for life, and Methos was entranced.

“Rowan,” he whispered, his mouth a breath away from the other man’s.

“Actually, it’s Daniel now,” Rowan said, and kissed him.

Methos would tell him to make up his mind, but he’d had so many pseudonyms himself it was a wonder he could keep them straight. Besides, Rowan... Daniel’s tongue was in his mouth, and it was rude to talk with his mouth full.

By the time he got possession of his lips again, talking was the furthest thing from his mind. As luck would have it, there was a nice sturdy table right there.

He'd always had a thing for libraries. And for... Daniel, in a library.

The usual happened. He tried to get Daniel's clothes off, Daniel maintained his modesty by the skin of his teeth, and some nosy bastard told them to take it to a room. At least they weren't being chased by prudes with pitchforks.

He loved universities.

Daniel had a room, as it turned out, he was a lecturer. On philosophy, of course. Hypatia's lessons had stuck, and he'd only learned more since then. He was also one of the central figures in the underground school for German mages, along with, of all things, a Catholic priest who was also a mage. Wonders never ceased.

He found this out much later. He was too busy right then getting Daniel out of the multiple layers of cloth he'd wrapped himself in. There was much to be said for the old ways of clothing. It was a lot faster to get to the tumble when all one had to do was flip up the edge of a robe.

"Anticipation," Daniel panted, "makes completion all the sweeter."

"Less talking, more skin," Methos informed him, finally getting his braies off. Bloody damned strings.

Then it was heat, and slick sweet soft skin under his mouth, under his hands. Daniel arched into him as Methos tasted him, stuffing his fist in his mouth to keep from crying out as he came.

Tolerant they may be, but the walls weren't that thick. Better not to take chances.

Then it was Methos' turn to hiss and swear under his breath. Daniel was tight as a virgin, shifting beneath him. He took as much time as he could, half-fearing he'd go off before he got properly seated. It had been awhile for him, as well. Still and all, they knew one another, and each knew precisely how to keep the other at the edge, how to bring him over, how to sink into one another and hold on when it was over. They nearly fell asleep that way, but for Daniel making little whining noises about being too damned sore to walk in the morning while Methos chided him for being a weakling.

Daniel tightened his hindquarters at that and Methos sang in a different octave.

Which, of course, led to round two. Daniel was, indeed, too sore to teach the next day. Not that he minded, since they never left the bed.

The following years were calm, at least for the two of them. After a decade they left the university to wander Europe, finding themselves in Spain when Pope Sixtus declared the Inquisition. Between them and their compatriots, they managed to get most of the mage apprentices out of the country, but the persecution followed. Within a century, Paul III declared the Roman Inquisition, and it was getting a little too hot to stay in Europe.

If they weren't burned for being mages, they'd be stoned to death the first time anyone saw them take a Quickening. Or, even worse, wake up from death.

Daniel wanted to head to the New World, as he was fed up with the Church and wanted to get away from people for a while. Methos was in the mood for luxury. Wanderlust pulling at them again, they kissed and parted. Daniel boarded a Dutch West India ship headed to New Netherland in 1615. Methos watched him from the dock, then headed back to the Ottoman Empire. He didn't land in the New World until 1804.

~ ~ ~

Staging point before Ascension, aka the Diner, 2005

It turned out Oma might let him in. The only catch? He could do nothing to save the galaxy. Nothing to save his friends, his planet, his allies, all the innocents on all the worlds that the other Ascended were giving Anubis free rein to destroy.

He tried to fight.

The damned light bounced off again.

Seeing him struggle and fail broke Oma. She gave up her work, all her efforts to help the deserving, like Daniel, find their way. She met Anubis head-on, fought him to a standstill, and would continue that fight into eternity.

It was horrifying.

It also finally got all the rest of the Ascended to look at him.

He blamed them. They should have listened. Should have acted. Should have balanced the incredible good Oma had done over eons against the one mistake she'd made. Should have balanced their justice, their punishment, with mercy. With understanding. With fucking common sense.

Daniel turned his back on them and walked out the door. Even death was better than being around the Ascended for eternity.

As his foot crossed the threshold of the diner, the sunlight blinded him. He was paralyzed by the rush of memories from his time as an Ascended, jolted loose by Replicator Sam's brutal mental assault. For a moment, he thought he would break, fly apart into particles of sunlight and dissipate into nothingness.

Instead, it was the light that broke.

The sunlight became a curtain of threads, holding that point in time at the center of the strand. He could read them, backward into the past, forward into the future. It was like he was having multiple visions but could still make sense of each of them.

A flash of vivid green eyes under an unruly thatch of black hair caught his attention.

It was Godric, but not the Godric he'd known. There was little laughter in this youth's expression. His eyes were haunted, his body marked by hardship and malnutrition. His skin was scarred, his arm, his back, his leg, even a rune carved into his forehead. He reached out with an unsteady hand and touched that beloved face with one fingertip.

His vision fragmented.

To his left, he saw the past. His foster son, targeted by a psychopathic mage, orphaned as an infant. His entire life manipulated by two old men, one calling himself light, the other reveling in the dark, neither seeing the child for the weapon. To the right he saw his son's future, in a stagnant world where nothing had changed, forever under the watchful eye of the government and the populace. Until his first death in this new incarnation. Awakening as an Immortal.

Torn to pieces by demons calling themselves wizards.

History. Repeated.

Not again.

He wasn't willing to have his boy go through that hell again. Wasn't going to wait another thousand years on the off chance that Godric would get a third try.

A chime sounded behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw another path. This led back to his current life. Back to Jack, and Teal'c, and Sam, and SG-1, with all that entailed.

He turned away. He had a duty that came before his current team. They would do fine without him.

Later, when things were settled, he would look in on them and make sure they were okay. He knew the path now, could ascend at will. Besides, they all thought he was dead, anyway.

Well, Sam said she didn't, but she always was stubborn.

Right now, he had a different duty. It was time to call on his lover and his brother, to rescue his son.

In this, his Ascended knowledge was an incalculable aid. Daniel, with what he knew, was not bound by time nor place. He gathered his will, let himself slip into the energy patterns he remembered from his first time on the higher plane, and reached out to Methos.

~ ~ ~

"A big ball of light." Joe sounded more resigned than surprised.

"Well, more of a squid, really."

The face surrounded by light looked a bit insulted. "I'm *not* a squid."

"Magic," Joe continued, in that same world-weary tone.

"Hm, maybe not a squid," Methos squinted at the light, smirking. "Tentacles. Possibilities spring to mind."

"Still a pervert, I see," the glowing... man? remarked.

"Always, and you love it," Methos retorted, and Joe sighed.

"You have a thing for the glow-squid." It wasn't a question.

"I've had a thing for that glow-squid for millennia, Joe," Methos answered anyway, the smirk softening to a real smile. Then he tore his eyes away from the face, now smiling back at him, to look over at Joe.

Before he could say it, Joe did, for him. "Get out of here, old man."

No one in the room mentioned the fact that, of the three of them, he looked by far the eldest.

"You'll be all right?"

The look Joe gave Methos could blister concrete, before he shook his head. "I watched over myself a hell of a long time before you came on the scene, man. And if that ain't enough, Amy's around every chance she gets. And there's always Duncan."

Methos paled, not that it was noticeable with his natural complexion. Joe waved him off. "I'll explain it to him. After Ahriman, magic and glowy squids shouldn't be a problem."

"I'm *not* a squid," the glowing being growled.

Methos pulled Joe into a hug, then stepped forward into the light. Joe watched it fade, blinked away the afterimage, and sighed. Yeah, the Highlander would believe it, but he'd bet a bottle of his best whiskey he'd also want to go along and help.

Damned good thing glowy squid guy didn't say where they were going.

~ ~ ~

"Hengest."

He hadn't heard that name in a long time. Absently reaching for a bookmark, he replied, "It's Giles now."

Beside him, Oz choked. He looked up.

Rowan, surrounded by light. What magic was this?

"Will you come? It's Godric."

Giles stared at the face of his brother staring back at him from within the cloud of light, and hesitated.

"Go," came Oz's calm voice. "We'll be okay."

In the background he could hear, as always, the muted cacophony of dozens of Slayers, training and bonding. Willow's voice came through, words indistinct but tone encouraging, and Giles smiled.

They would be okay. The coven would watch over Willow. Oz and Xander would help the Watchers, such as they were, and the girls would be just fine. He wasn't needed here.

Rowan needed him.

A thought struck him. Yes, the Potter child's face had looked familiar.

Godric, no, *Harry* needed him.

And Giles needed to be needed.

He took the hand extended to him, watched his wrist be wrapped in tendrils of light. It felt like sunlight after a cold night.

"Take care of them, please," he said quietly, turning to stare at Oz's face, as it grew hazy before it disappeared into the whiteness that filled his vision.

Oz's smile told him everything he needed to know.

~ ~ ~

It was a little like apparition, Giles thought. Except it really, really wasn't.

It was being, and nothingness. Forever, and a pinpoint. It was the universe, and a grain of sand.

And he was getting poetic, so it was either time to find a book, kill something, or get drunk.

He felt more than heard Rowan's voice.

"It's Daniel now."

Right. Okay. Legitimency. But really not.

Soul magic was more Methos' thing than his, by a long shot. But this was it, if ever it was.

There weren't words, but there were images. He saw fifteen years of hell, and another fifteen to come, before young Harry met the same fate he had as Godric. He felt Methos' vicious rejection, and Rowan... no, Daniel's gentle query.

If not now, when?

The boy alone, or the world as well?

There was so much wrong with the British wizarding world, and inertia was a strong opponent. Should they intervene now and simply whisk the boy away? Teach him the truth, protect and hide him? Should they enter the time stream later, after the war, after he'd accepted his place as Master of Death, and do what they couldn't the last time, save him from the mob? Or should the intervention come earlier, before he had experienced so much pain, and do as adults should, take care of the problems so the children didn't have to?

It was unanimous. With a thought, they moved. It was like being caught in a whirlwind whilst standing in place.

~ ~ ~

Privet Drive, Surrey, England, October 31, 1980

Daniel sifted through the threads of fate, searching for a flux point that would accept their energies. He wanted to save Harry's family, but the death of his parents was a nexus. He inserted them as close to that explosion of energy as he could get.

"Good god, talk about cookie cutter neighborhood," Hengest... no, Giles, said. Grumpily.

Daniel grinned despite himself. He'd missed the old grouch.

Methos' fingers wrapped around his, and he welcomed the warmth. He'd missed his lover even more. But it hadn't been safe to expose the oldest Immortal to the inquiring minds of the US military, who were already jumping at alien sightings (with good reason). It was bad enough that Daniel himself kept dying, but at least there was always a convenient sarcophagus or friendly alien around to take the credit when he popped back up alive.

Although Oma had been in a class by herself. He sent a mental thank you to the being who had made this possible, and flipped her brethren a mental finger for being such complete assholes.

A tiny cry brought his attention back to the present, along with Methos cursing in Etruscan under his breath. A tug on his magic led him toward a dark stoop, and he caught his breath.

Albus Dumbledore was a moron. Leaving a baby in a basket on a porch in November, with a single blanket, a warming charm that was fading, and a sleep charm that never took.

"I'm going to kill him," Methos said, scooping the baby up from the basket.

Rowan's finger twitched, and the enchanted parchment lying on the abandoned wicker went up in a spark of blue flame, along with the binding magic attached to it. The vampiric blood wards that would otherwise have latched on and drained their boy would never take root.

"You leave that to me," Giles growled as they turned and moved away from dark, cold house. "It's my school he's been screwing with. Time he got what was coming to him."

"Our school?" Rowan asked absently, concentrating on layering comfort charms around the toddler in Methos' arms.

"I was the last headmaster among us," Giles stated, tucking the trailing blanket around Harry's little feet and glaring around, ready to slaughter anyone who got in their way.

"Good point," Rowan conceded. Once they were around the corner into the alley, away from any insomniac eyes that might spy them, he embraced both men and the child.

"I know just the place."

Ravenclaw's Keep looked exactly as it had the last time he'd seen it, over three centuries before. The house elves took excellent care, as was their wont. Upon arrival, they were instantly surrounded by a dozen short, energetic, goggle-eyed beings. As one, they raised their hands and cried welcome to

Master Rowan Daniel... then fell silent and stared at the baby.

Harry stared back.

It was love at first sight.

It was also very late – or very early, really – and the poor kid had endured a horrible day, losing his parents, being shot at by a maniac, having the roof fall into his nursery, being kidnapped and flown away on a motorcycle while freezing half to death, then being abandoned on a cement step in the dark. He was more than ready for sleep.

The elves descended, and the Prince was cared for.

This left the adults, who were all wide awake and fuming, with several hours free to plan.

Well, plot, really.

Something at which Methos excelled, Giles wasn't too bad at himself, and Daniel supported wholeheartedly.

By dawn, they had a working draft of an action plan. Daniel would take care of Harry. Daniel was the best at wards, theory – which would help Harry as he learned the old-fashioned way, since his teachers came from the time before wands – and mind magic, to protect him from the powerful individuals who would try to use him for their own ends. The boy would be hidden, protected, and taught.

They would all take care of making sure he knew he was loved.

Giles would take care of Hogwarts. Dumbledore had to go, and his sycophants with him. As a Watcher, then the Head Watcher, part of Giles' purview had been keeping tabs on what was happening in the wizarding world, particularly in England. What had happened to Hogwarts was heartbreaking. The curriculum had been gutted, over half the faculty were incompetent if not downright dangerous to have around children, and the Board of Governors was an abomination that had no place in the institution. Not to mention the duffer reputation of Hufflepuff house (and how on Earth had Helga come up with that?). Things Needed to Change.

Methos was going hunting. His strength had always been soul magic, and from what Daniel had shown him, Tom Riddle had created perversions that were exactly what Methos could clean up. Add to that his penchant for infiltrating, assassinating, and burning down the houses of mages that pissed him off, and the British Wizarding World was about to get a long overdue kick in the arse.

Less than a day since they'd reclaimed Harry, Daniel gave him a physical and magical checkup. The poor kid was in overall very good health, but there was something weird about the rune scar on his forehead. Giving it a glare, he cuddled Harry to his chest and went off in search of Giles. When in doubt about anything Norse, ask the Viking.

"Sowilo?" Giles asked absently, smiling gently down at Harry, who stared back up at him with huge green eyes. If he found it strange to see his long-ago comrade in arms as such a tiny tyke, he didn't mention it. He then made the mistake of touching the scar. "Shit!"

"Language," Daniel automatically called him on it.

Harry looked interested. "Tht?" he asked.

Giles muttered something under his breath in Aramaic that Daniel was glad Harry couldn't hear, then told them they needed to ask Methos. "Whatever it is, it goes deep, and it's filthy."

Methos took one close look at it and began to curse a stream, thankfully in Old Wu-Min. Daniel had the odd idea that by the time Harry spoke in complete sentences, given the adults in his life, he'd know obscenities in half a hundred languages, many of them dead.

"Tht?" Harry asked Methos, and Methos stopped in his tracks.

Daniel pointed at Giles.

Giles blushed.

Methos smirked, then made a 'gimme' motion toward Harry, who responded by enthusiastically flinging his body toward his dad. Daniel wondered for a moment about genetic memory, then shook it off. He could dream about philosophy later; right now he had some kind of infection to extract from his son.

Down to the ritual room they went, with a quick stop by the stock room to pick up some chalk, some hematite, opal, lapis lazuli, and obsidian, and several fat beeswax candles. As they were leaving, Harry reached out with one hand, and a chunk of rose quartz flew at Daniel. He caught it by reflex and added it to the pile.

"A year and a half, and already showing deliberate magic. Kid's going to be a powerhouse," Giles mused, acting as pack horse for the majority of the supplies as they entered the ritual room.

Methos placed Daniel in the center of the room, handed Harry to him, and beckoned Giles to follow him. The next hour went quickly. Harry was surprisingly well behaved, watching his father

and his uncle in fascination from the safety of his dad's arms. Methos wrote runes in a running circular script, over, under, sideways, stopping once in awhile to think, then diving back in. When the pattern was complete, he had Giles place the candles, then he himself placed the gems. Daniel held the rose quartz directly over Harry's heart, and Harry placed his little hands down on the crystal between Daniel's hands.

Giles moved back to guard the door out of sheer habit, as Methos stepped carefully through the winding runes to kneel behind Daniel. He placed one arm around both man and child, and hovered the other over the Sowilo rune on Harry's forehead. He began a low chant in a language it took Daniel a while to recognize as Elamite.

There was a hush. Even the candle flames stilled on the wick.

Suddenly, the gems flared, one after another. All three men tensed, but the shooting sparks didn't burn when they landed. The rose quartz suddenly blossomed with light.

Harry giggled.

From nowhere, and everywhere, there came a scream, then another, and another, until the chamber echoed with the sounds of men and women in agony. Daniel instinctively curled to protect Harry, but Methos' arm kept him in place. From all four cardinal points, streaks of black shadow arrowed into the chamber and hovered, looking like nothing more than a sickly ink spill in the air. The shrieks wove together and came to a crescendo, then abruptly cut off. The instant they did, the rune on Harry's forehead split open.

A single drop of blood traced down the side of his face.

Then, a narrow stream of smoke poured from it. The hovering shadows immediately joined with it, and it congealed slowly. The smoke took the shaky form of a man, contorted beyond recognition. The light from the rose quartz solidified into a translucent shield, curving over Harry, Daniel, and Methos. The shade flew toward the shield.

It bounced off.

It then set its sights on Giles, and flew screaming toward him. It hit the edge of the runic inscription, and it bounced back.

That was all the chance it had. As it rebounded toward the center again, Harry sang out, "Bye!"

A hole opened between two layers of the runes on the floor. The wraith gave a rather comical double-take, and they distinctly heard the word, "Fuck!"

as it was sucked into the hole. Then there was another garbled scream, a blast of heat, and the hole closed.

“Welcome to hell,” Methos said lightly.

“Fck?” asked Harry.

Daniel couldn't help it. He laughed so hard he fell over.

Thankfully the ritual was complete, so it didn't matter that he smudged the chalk lines. Otherwise he never would have heard the end of it from Methos.

~ ~ ~

After Daniel regained his composure and left to give Harry his brunch, Methos shooed Giles away so he could complete his work. He carefully erased the runic construction that had drawn out the horcrux, such a disgusting piece of crap to stick in a baby's head. From the way the ritual had gone, the idiot had made several, but that wasn't a problem. They had been drawn toward the origination point, and once reintegrated, had been literally sent to hell where it belonged.

No one split a soul on Methos' watch. They most certainly didn't do it using his son.

There had been a complication, though. The multiple screams was an unforeseen aspect to manifest. He had to find out what that was all about.

Taking up the single element of the ritual that hadn't been part of his plan, Harry's crystal, Methos stared at it for a long time, feeling it out with his magic, trying to determine what it had done, how it had done it, and why.

Nine hours, a trance deep enough to nearly cause a migraine, tracing spells in Akkadian, Phoenician, Ancient Cyrillic, and even a stab at Khitan – though old Mongolian had never been his strong suit – and he finally landed on a Brahmi hex that was used to track lineages in order to gain vengeance in the case of a cursed family. It made him sit up and peer intently into the rose quartz.

A lineage. A family tree. A master with a whole shitload of slaves. Voldemort, tied to his death eaters.

Taking them with him to hell.

He extended his hands, the crystal in his right, his left writing in smoke in the air. Tendrils curled throughout the room, but at the end of every branch there was nothing but a shriveled nub. From the look of it, Riddle had tied his minions

to him by soul magic, and as he'd done with the horcruxes, he hadn't realized, or hadn't cared, what he was dealing with. Uniting and damning Riddle's soul had caused him to draw on the magic and life force of all his followers. All over England, a bunch of bad guys and gals died screaming in hideous agony.

Methos reached through the smoke and pinched one of the shrunken ends. A picture formed, the blurry outline of a lovely room, a bit too much gilding and the peacocks crying in the background were overkill, but still lovely. A woman, half-hiding in a corner behind an armoire, terror contorting her beautiful face into an ugly mask. A man, long blond hair and too many embroidered snakes on his waistcoat, writhing on the ground, pulling at his arm as if trying to detach it. Screaming, until his voice fell silent, until his movements stopped. Then his body began to shrivel just as the mystical representation of his life force had, until he was nothing more than a husk. The image disintegrated back into smoke.

He watched dispassionately as the death eater died and the vision dissipated, then muttered, “Well, that was easy enough.”

A ritual cleansing of the room, an affectionate pat to the rose quartz, and Methos headed upstairs to be with his family.

It was about time for Harry's bed time story. Maybe the one about the dragon. Or, no, that might teach the boy more new words Daniel would smack Methos over. How about the Manchurian princess? No, that would get him in trouble, and he'd just gotten Daniel back. He didn't want to sleep on the couch already.

He whistled as he went toward the family quarters, turning five thousand years of experience over in his head. Surely there was something kid-friendly in there? He was still thinking when he got to Harry's room.

Moot point. The kid was already snoring. He guessed getting a Horcrux pulled out of one's head did make for a tough day, and it had already been a tough week. He planted a light kiss on the flawless forehead where the scar used to be, and walked silently out of the room.

Time to find Daniel. It had been *way* too long.

~ ~ ~

Hogwart's, Headmaster's office, November 4, 1980

Albus Dumbledore stared at his non-whirling, non-tweeting trinkets, also known as tracking devices, with consternation.

Why hadn't the blood wards taken? He'd left a compulsion charm on the letter. Petunia was a bitch, but she was an easily-led bitch. Give her a sniff of danger to her own whelp, and she'd take in her orphaned nephew with alacrity. She would keep him out of sight, safe from Voldemort's followers, and not let him get a big head for being Savior of the Wizarding World. When the time came, he would be pliable, strong enough but not too strong, and willing to sacrifice his all for whomever rescued him from the Dursleys, and by extension, for the Wizarding World. Thus extending whatever arcane magic Lily performed that saved him from the killing curse to the entirety of his magical brethren and ridding the world of Voldemort all at the same time.

It was a genius plan.

That had apparently imploded before it even began.

He sighed, pulled out his wand, and readied himself to see what fly Petunia had managed to stick in the ointment.

Then he nearly shat himself when his wand wrenched itself out of his hand and flew across the room to land in the hand of a tall, broad-shouldered stranger stepping out from the shadows of the back corner of the room.

How in Merlin's name had he gotten in? And who the bloody hell was he, to take the Elder Wand from him without so much as an incantation or a wand movement? Or a damned *wand*, from what Dumbledore could see.

The wizard who came to a stop a few feet away from him was rather unassuming. Attractive, yes. Albus was old, not dead, and he could certainly appreciate a handsome man. This one was lean, well-built, with an angular face. Piercing green eyes stared back at him, the left iris highlighted with a bronze spot.

A mage spot.

Albus shivered.

"Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Order of Merlin, First Class; Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Grand Sorcerer."

For some reason, his accomplishments sounded more like an insult than a compliment, listed out in that deep voice.

"Who are you?" He was proud his voice didn't waver. He had to get his wand back.

"My name is Hengest. They call me the Hellhound."

His heart stuttered.

Every headmaster of Hogwarts, upon taking up the position, learned of the true Four Founders. Unlike the popular history, that celebrated diversity and pretended that a female mage would be allowed to wield power in medieval Scotland, the Founders were actually all men. Men who lived for centuries, and other than Godric Gryffindor, who'd had a fatal run-in with some of the locals, none of them had died. All of them had left, and all of them left writings that indicated they would one day return.

It was that day.

He had a feeling he was in deep, deep trouble.

The following hours were very unpleasant for the Headmaster. Physically constrained to a straight-backed wooden chair that Hengest had conjured with a thought, he'd been forced to hear some home truths that he'd been avoiding for decades.

He was over-extended.

He was not fit to oversee children.

He was lucky it was Hengest here dealing with him, because Slytherin was also in town, and was not happy with the way young Harry Potter had been treated.

Albus nearly swallowed his tongue at that one, but it did confirm something he'd suspected. Lily Potter had been an Unspeakable. She'd also been barren. So when she and James presented their son, the Potter heir, to the world, it caused Albus quite a lot of suspicion. From what he was learning now, and from whom he was learning it, it would appear that somehow Godric Gryffindor was reborn. The Founders Four were reunited.

And they weren't happy with him.

The single bright spot in the night of fear for his life was that Voldemort was dead. He'd wondered, when the Daily Prophet reported that so many 'fine upstanding members of the pureblood community' shriveled up like prunes all at once, but he hadn't been certain. Hengest the Hellhound confirmed Voldemort's death, and Albus had a moment to appreciate that his plans, and young Harry's sacrifice, would not be needed.

Then Hengest started back in on the state of the school, and how Albus' leadership had sent it down the toilet, and he was back to fearing for his life.

An hour before breakfast, he was finally released from the magical chains, as the chair dissolved

beneath him and he landed on his arse on the stone floor. That was going to bruise. He hauled himself up and shakily called for an elf, Hengest fulminating at him from his perch on the corner of what had been Albus' desk. Several tense moments of silence later, Minerva came bustling up the stairs.

"What on earth is this all about, Alb-" She cut off abruptly when she saw Hengest.

Her response was mirrored by the Founder, who sat up straight, then stood up, pulled his glasses from his face and began to polish them furiously.

It would have been funny, if not for the lingering terror Albus felt at Hengest's mere presence.

"Minerva, my dear, I am sorry to drop this on you, but I will be retiring. Immediately."

She tore her eyes away from the man blushing at her, and turned on Albus. All she got out was a splutter, before he continued. "Minerva McGonagall, may I present Hengest the Hellhound, the Founder who preceded Helga Hufflepuff and whose house she took on."

Minerva wheeled back to stare at Hengest in shock.

"I go by Rupert Giles now," he said mildly. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

She had one hand on her heart, no doubt to calm minor palpitations. Albus patted her on the shoulder and slid behind her, more than happy to finally have a human shield between himself and his Hufflepuff nightmare.

"Lord Hengest, this is Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House and Transfiguration Professor. I'm sure you will get along delightfully in your new role as Headmaster. Goodbye!"

He scurried down the stairs faster than he had moved in eighty years. He'd have an elf pack for him later. He had to get out of there. He'd worry about details later.

After he obtained another wand. Blast it.

~ ~ ~

Giles was quite taken with the animagus before him.

Minerva was quite charmed with the mage before her.

It was the start of a rather romantic and quite sweet relationship that would shake the foundations of the magical educational world.

~ ~ ~

Gringott's Bank, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ministry of Magic, London, December 11, 1980

Daniel left Methos curled up asleep around Harry, but not before snapping several photographs.

Besides the blackmail potential, it was just too cute to pass up. He dressed in Ravenclaw robes, which oddly didn't look out of style, since styles in the Wizarding World hadn't changed all that much in centuries, and if they were a little old-fashioned, he could always claim they were 'retro.' If he cared. Which he didn't. Stopping the mental babbling before it could become verbal, recognizing his own coping mechanisms when he was nervous, he took a deep breath and walked up to the nearest goblin.

He hated goblins. Venal, amoral, vicious little bastards that would sell their own mothers for a spare galleon, if they even knew who their mothers were. He'd voted for the gnomes, but nobody else wanted to go to the Alps to do their banking, so he was over-ruled. So here he was, a thousand years later, letting one of the little creeps stab him in the hand with a knife to prove he was who he said he was.

It was kind of satisfying, he had to admit, to see the little pest fall off his stool in a faint.

The rest of the morning was as entertaining, if not more so. The wards he'd placed on the Founders' Vault – there was only one, as they actually did consider each other family – had weathered the times so well none of the multiple efforts the goblins had made to get into it had succeeded. He wondered how many had been torched trying.

It was all there, and he smiled. One more piece of business, and when he was done, he was going to transfer everything he could get his hands on to Switzerland. The gnomes were forewarned and waiting.

First, there was the Potter will to expedite.

The branch manager thought he was going to insist on Daniel bringing little Harry to the bank personally. As if. There was no way he was bringing a toddler in so a goblin could stab him with a knife and scar him for life, at least mentally. Daniel looked at the officious little bastard, and let a little of his magic flow out. His eyes glowed. The ground shook. Dust filtered down, and the goblin looked up, turning an odd shade of green.

Then Daniel handed over the paperwork he'd already filled out, with Methos' signature as

Salazar Slytherin, and Harry's magical matrix embedded on it.

He'd had it the whole time, of course. He just wanted to see them sweat. He didn't get petty very often, but the goblins had metaphorically knifed him in the back more than once through the centuries, and a little payback was fun.

They couldn't get him the will, the keys to the Potter Trust and Family vaults, and a full accounting on a pile of parchment, fast enough. He smiled sweetly, took everything with him, and tapped the aventurine and citrine communication crystal in his pocket. That was the signal to the gnomes. By the time the goblins figured it out, every last sickle from the Founders' Vault, the Potter vaults, the assorted Hogwarts' vaults, and the dozen or so vaults he, Methos and Giles had under other names from over the years, would be translocated to their counterparts in the Swiss Alps.

None of them would have their money held hostage by the greedy goblins again. And now that Giles was back in the Headmaster's seat, he could unseal the on-site vaults that no faculty had been able to access since Helga died. Funding issues would be a thing of the past.

Humming merrily under his breath, he stopped in at Fortescue's Ice Cream Shoppe for a pick-me-up of dark chocolate, raspberry and honey crumble. Then he opened the Last Will and Testament of James and Lily Potter.

Later, he'd have to admit it was a pretty impressive spit take. At the time, he was just irritated that he'd knocked over his sundae.

Ten full hours, a surprise visit to the office of Bartemius Crouch that turned ugly for a moment until Daniel verbally stomped him into mush, a loudly explosive visit to the office of Minister Millicent Bagnold, a quietly furious hearing at the hastily-assembled Wizengamot – lead by Lady Longbottom in the unexpected absence of Albus Dumbledore – and Sirius Black was free from Azkaban Prison. The Order of Merlin awarded to Peter Pettigrew was hastily rescinded, and an arrest order was issued. Bartemius Crouch was fired. Amelia Bones was promoted.

All in all, a good day.

In the weeks that followed, Giles would thank him. With the curse on the post of Defense against the Dark Arts dissolved with Tom Riddle's death, with Snape dead and Binns exorcised, Giles had been up to his ears revamping curriculum, disbanding what was left of the Board after half of them died along with their master, and scouting for new

faculty. Andromeda Tonks stepped forward to teach Potions, sending Slytherin house into shock as a blood traitor became their new Head. Methos got a kick out of that.

Remus Lupin came forward to take up the DADA position. With no Board to throw a fit about his status as a lycanthrope, and Andromeda more than willing to brew his Wolfsbane, he was reassured that he could be around the kids without being a danger to them. Giles was pretty sure he had the notes for a potion that would do the same or better than the current version of Wolfsbane, as well, without the nasty build-up of poison that would eventually kill any werewolf who took it. He'd ask Daniel to collaborate.

He didn't tell Remus. Better to cure him first, then find out the guy who'd invented the potion to help him keep his sanity during the change actually hated werewolves with a passion.

Sirius Black was happy to take the History professorship, throwing himself into it to divert his mind from recent tragedies. He rather enjoyed turning all the history he'd had crammed into his head by his crazy relatives upside down for the next generation of Hogwarts students. Gryffindor house was quite happy with their new head.

Things were coming together. Their school was getting back on track. And Giles had a girlfriend who could turn into a cat.

Daniel and Methos teased him mercilessly. Right up until they met her. She turned them both into ferrets, and spent the rest of the afternoon holding hands with Giles and cooing at Harry.

Harry adored her.

Daniel could have lived forever without discovering that Methos was just as horny as a ferret as he was as a human.

~ ~ ~

Ravenclaw's Keep, April 19, 1986

Daniel watched as Harry carefully traced out his letters. Unlike the centuries before, or five years ago before Giles modernized Hogwarts, he didn't have to fight a feather to learn how to write. A pencil worked just fine.

Padfoot came bouncing down the hallway, caught sight of his godson hard at work, and flung himself at the doorway. Work could wait! It was time to play!

Sadly for his plans, he bounced off the barrier Daniel placed in the doorway to keep the ebullient dog animagus from bowling Harry over in the

middle of his lessons. Over the last four years, Sirius had spent every second he wasn't teaching at Hogwarts – or chasing ladies – at the Keep. Daniel was quite used to his antics.

Harry chortled then made a show of concentrating on his bookwork when Daniel raised an eyebrow at him.

“Work now, play later. Gotcha, dad.” He grinned and Daniel smiled back at him.

“It's about time for your next lesson, anyway.”

Bright green eyes met his, glittering in happiness. Daniel called an elf for hot chocolate, then sat cross-legged facing his son. In his peripheral vision, he saw Sirius doing his best impression of an unwanted orphan puppy sitting in the rain begging to be let in.

He was ignored.

Harry drank his chocolate, poking at a marshmallow and giggling, before setting his cup aside. It disappeared before it hit his desk. Daniel grinned. He loved house elves.

Then he put his hands out, palms up. Harry placed his much smaller hands in them, and they clasped lightly. Green eyes met blue. In the hallway, Sirius gave a huff and lay down for a nap.

Harry's mind was chaotic, as it should be for a child. Daniel worked with it, teaching his son as he had been taught, long before standards aimed at the slowest in the herd had taken hold in the educator's mindset. In Harry's mindscape, at the center of the whirlwind, Daniel extended his hand, and Harry took it. Then they sat, mirroring the positions they held in the real world. Next to them was a huge pile of Lego blocks.

For the next hour, they played. Laughed. Built walls with the Legos and set them around Harry's mind. Over time, with no stress and no fuss, the Legos blended into a sphere of solid lonsdaleite, half again harder than diamond. Very few wizards knew what it was, and Harry thought meteorites were cool. By the time he was ten, he would have occlumency shields stronger than any other modern wizard, and he would refine them for the rest of his life. This, in turn, would help him organize his thoughts and retain what he learned, honing already impressive innate talent into incredible skills.

But for the moment, he was just a child, playing with blocks with his dad. Daniel looked around and nodded, proud of his son, as always.

The kid was a natural.

~ ~ ~

The Great Hall at Hogwarts Castle, Sorting Ceremony, 1991

A happy, well-adjusted, healthy Harry Potter took his place under the Sorting Hat. The hall held its breath for a long moment, before the rim moved, and a voice that sounded suspiciously like Salazar Slytherin cried out, “Hufflepuff!”

The headmaster smiled at his boy, ducked his head, and polished his glasses.



CAST

Chronologically eldest: Methos (Salazar Slytherin) Ubaidian scribe from the city of Eridu, in Southern Mesopotamia (modern day Abu Sha Rain in Iraq). Born c. 3800 BCE. About 35 at the time of his first death. Approximately 4800 years old at the founding of Hogwarts in 987 CE. Was riding as Death with the Horsemen of the Apocalypse before the others were born. Lover of Rowan/Daniel, adoptive father of Godric/Harry. STRENGTH: Strategist; soul magic (including necromancy)

Daniel Jackson (Rowan, corrupted to Rowena, Ravenclaw) Originally from Achmore in Scotland, of the Beaker People. Born near the beginning of the Bronze Age c. 2500 BCE. About 30 at the time of first death. Approximately 3500 years old at the founding of Hogwarts in 987 CE. Strategist whose magical strength lies in the Soul Magics (including necromancy and beast magic). Lover of Methos. STRENGTH: Seer; Mind Magics (including occlumency, legilimency, divination, and the emotions, seated in the mind).

Harry Potter (Godric Gryffindor) Born circa 400 BCE. Adoptive son of Salazar/Methos, foster son of Rowan/Daniel. Spent all of his life as Godric as a soldier. Approximately 1400 at the founding of Hogwarts. Killed by a mob of wizards after coming back to life 1034 CE. Reborn as Harry Potter in 1980. STRENGTH: practical applications of magic (defense, healing, building).

Physically eldest and chronologically youngest of the original surviving founders is Rupert Giles (Hengest the Hellhound, remembered through his adopted daughter Helga Hufflepuff). Jute war leader from Jutland (northern Denmark). Born 415 CE. Came to Britain at the bequest of King Vitalinus (aka Vortigren, or Supreme Leader) to battle the Picts with 'adventus Saxonum' the coming of the Saxons, circa 450 CE. First death at the age of 45, he is 572 years old at founding of Hogwarts. STRENGTH: Offensive Magics (known as a warrior mage).



TIMELINE

Eridu, Southeastern Mesopotamia, circa 3800 BCE – Methos' first death

Achmore, Scotland, circa 2500 BCE, Beaker village – Daniel's first death

Minoan Crete, circa 2300 BCE – Methos and Daniel hook up

Aram, circa 420 BCE – The Horsemen Happen: Daniel is taken captive by Death

Llwyn Bryn Dinas, a forthill settlement in Bronze Age Wales, circa 400 BCE – 200 CE – Daniel escapes Death and Methos leaves the Horseman. Methos adopted baby Godric.

Belgium, circa 200 BCE – Daniel becomes the Druid, Rowan.

Alexandria, 415 CE – Daniel and Methos hook up again, breaking up after the murder of their teacher, Hypatia

Kent, 457 CE – Giles' first death (as Hengest). Godric takes him home to meet Daddy Methos

Gaul, circa 600 CE – Methos and Daniel hook back up. Godric meets Rowan and gains a second father

Alba, circa 781 CE – Giles saves Godric, who then takes him home to meet Rowan (and Merlin, and say hi to Methos)

Scotland, Hogwarts Castle, circa 987 CE – the Founders Four (Methos/Salazar, Daniel/Rowan, Giles/Hengest, and Godric) open a school

Outside the castle walls, Hogwarts, 1034 CE – Godric is seen coming back to life and killed by a freaked-out wizard mob. Methos and Daniel break up again. Giles runs the school

Heidelberg, Germany, 1458 – Daniel and Methos reconnect. Eventually they flee the Inquisition, Daniel to the New World and Methos to the Old

(Plane of Ascension, 2005 – Daniel decides to gather his family and go help Harry)

Surrey, England, October 31, 1980 – three men pick up the baby

Raven's Keep, Scotland, November 1, 1980 – Methos performs arcane rituals. Voldemort and all his minions croak

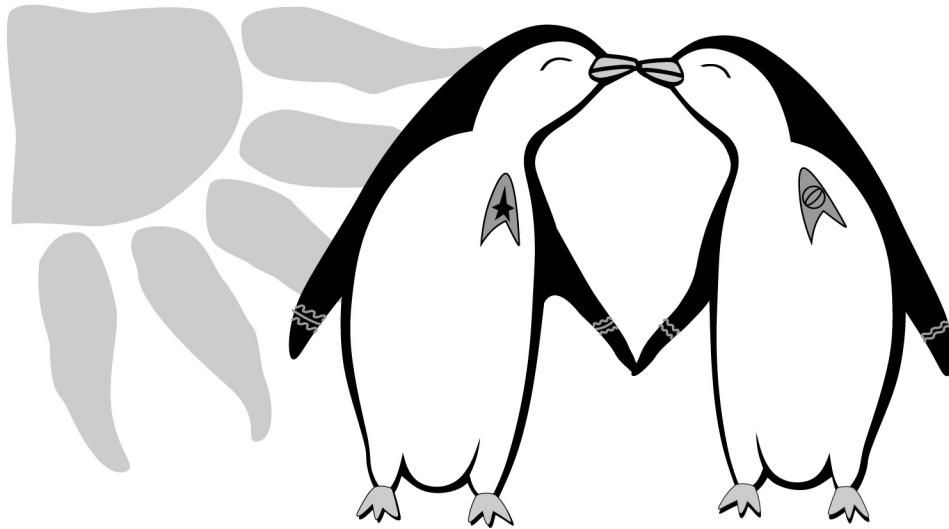
Hogwart's, Headmaster's office, November 4, 1980 – Dumbledore gets his comeuppance, Giles gets a new job, and Minnie gets a boyfriend

Wizarding London, December 11, 1980 – goblins get schooled, wills are read, Sirius is freed, and Giles fills out his faculty roster

Ravenclaw's Keep, April 19, 1986 – Daniel teaches Harry letters and occlumency. Sirius is bored.

Hogwarts Castle, Sorting Ceremony, 1991 – Healthy, happy Harry is sorted, and history is forever changed





Moving Up

by KatBear

Editor's Notes

Could an Escapade 25-year nostalgia zine be complete without at least *one* classic *Star Trek* Kirk/Spock story? No, not really. This story looks through some of those classic lenses that fans—and no doubt the “classic” Captain Kirk—may have grappled with.

Moving Up

by KatBear

Kirk nodded as he finished signing the datapad and handed it back to the yeoman. He took a slow look around the bridge, noting with pleasure the easy efficiency of the crew. His gaze paused briefly on the figure of his first officer, and he allowed himself a slight upward shift of the corners of his mouth in anticipation of their upcoming shore leave. They had been lovers for only a few months, a very discreet and far too infrequent relationship to suit his desires, and it would be their first opportunity to be together away from the ship. His thoughts drifted as he let his eyes wander absently around the bridge again; yes, he was definitely looking forward to this shore leave.

~ ~ ~

The hot sun warmed bare skin as Kirk walked out of the blue-green ocean. Soft waves lapped at his knees as he paused to shake the water from his face. He smiled as he glanced around at the sheltered cove and small cabin sitting just inside the tree line. It wasn't the fanciest or most luxurious place, but it had the basic amenities and, most important of all, privacy. The smile widened when his gaze settled on the lanky figure stretched out on the old blanket. He sauntered across the white sand and dropped down next to Spock.

Playfully running a wet hand down the Vulcan's chest and belly, Kirk grinned as he watched the muscles ripple and contract from the cool contact.

"It's too nice a day for sleeping," Kirk teased, fingers trailing back up the taut stomach.

Eyes firmly closed, Spock replied, "Dr. McCoy has repeatedly urged me to take shore leave in order to rest. Therefore, I am resting."

"There are a lot of ways to rest." Kirk leered, fingers carding through his companion's dark chest hair. "Engaging in enjoyable activities can be even more restful than just sleeping."

"If the purpose of resting is to conserve energy, I suspect that the activities you have in mind are

hardly conducive to that purpose," Spock answered dryly.

"Ah, but if you expend enough of the right kind of energy, you'll sleep much better." Kirk smirked wickedly as his fingers wandered lower to nudge the waistband of his first officer's black shorts.

Spock finally opened his eyes, rolled up on his side and propped himself on one elbow. "I must admit that the proposed energy expenditure does have a certain attraction," he said quietly. Intercepting the wayward fingers, he brought Kirk's hand to his mouth and brushed the knuckles with a light kiss.

"Well, I've got lots of energy I want to expend on you, my friend." Kirk leaned forward to kiss Spock, but paused halfway as he noted the slight frown marring the elegant features.

"Spock?" He knew his lover had an intense desire for privacy. Kirk looked around. "Would you rather we go inside?"

The silence held for a long moment. Spock still had Kirk's hand, his long thumb absently rubbing the knuckles. Pulling himself back with a slight start, Spock finally answered. "Inside?" he murmured, "how apropos."

"Is something wrong?" Kirk puzzled at the turn the conversation had taken.

"No, Jim, there is nothing wrong." Spock looked into Kirk's face. "I have been contemplating our relationship, however. We have been friends for two point nine years and have been intimate for three point one months, but I have realized that there is still much that we do not truly know about each other."

"Well, humans and Vulcans can be pretty complicated critters," Kirk said with a flash of his most charming grin. When he elicited no response, he continued with a studied casualness, "Not having second thoughts about us, are you?"

Apparently recognizing the unstated fear, Spock kissed Kirk's hand again. "What we have is good," he said with one of his enigmatic not-quite-smiles. He gave the captive hand a reassuring squeeze. "It is just that there is still much to explore in our relationship."

"Ah," Kirk said. He felt stupid, an uncommon occurrence in most of his romantic experience. On the other hand, though, he had found Spock to be both complex and intriguing, sometimes totally unexpected, so perhaps this was simply another of those occasions. "Is there something in particular you wanted to, uh, 'explore'?"

"Yes."

"Oookaaay," Kirk said. "Exploration is good, keeps life interesting."

"I need to ask you a question first, Jim."

"Sure. Fire away."

"Do you believe that our personal relationship is different from our official, on-duty relationship?"

"Of course, Spock." Kirk felt his forehead furrow and consciously tried to relax the frown. "I thought we had clearly established that. Off-duty it's just you and me--friends, equals, partners. I have always tried to keep our official roles out of that as much as was feasible."

"I merely wished to confirm that you still felt that way," Spock replied, his voice a shade warmer than usual. "That is how I feel also." He paused. "I want you to know that I have greatly enjoyed our friendship, and our intimacy has brought me much pleasure."

"As it has to me. That friendship is very important to me," Kirk said, sensing the inner twitch that typically denoted impatience. He was not feeling good about the direction this conversation seemed to be taking. "But you said you wanted to do something different?"

"Affirmative."

"Well, what did you have in mind?"

"In our intimate relationship so far, you have always had the penetrative role," Spock said. "While this has been pleasurable, as I noted, I would like to reverse our roles occasionally."

Kirk looked at his lover blankly.

"I believe the appropriate terms are 'topping' and 'bottoming'," Spock added helpfully.

"I know what the damned terms are," Kirk snapped. "So, you want to be the . . . top?"

"Affirmative."

"I see." But he hadn't, not until Spock had spelled it out. He *deserved* to feel stupid, for missing that.

The awkward silence stretched. Kirk shifted to a cross-legged sitting position, hands on his knees, staring out to sea. Spock waited patiently, face expressionless.

Finally Kirk spoke hesitantly. "Look, it's not like I don't want to experiment or anything, it's just that, well . . ."

"You have never done this before, have you?" asked Spock. The slightest tinge of green painted Spock's cheeks and he seemed to be almost embarrassed not to have realized this earlier.

"No," Kirk said. He looked at Spock, then shrugged. "That's just how it's always been."

It was Spock's turn to utter a stone-faced, "I see."

More uncomfortable silence. With an almost imperceptible sigh, Spock stood up. "I am going for a walk," he announced.

"Spock, please wait," Kirk said a little too loudly, "I'm sure we can work something out." What, he had no idea.

"I believe we both need some time to think, Jim," Spock replied, his tone dark and distant. He nodded briefly before he turned away to tread across the hot sand.

Kirk knelt on both knees, one hand raised, but his normally glib tongue couldn't find words to say that might bring his lover back. With a sigh of frustration, he dropped his arms to his sides, and watched until Spock had disappeared from view around the point of the cove.

Sinking back onto the blanket, Kirk hugged his knees close to his chest, hanging his head. His own reactions to Spock's simple request stunned him. James Kirk had always been comfortable with his sexuality – he had enjoyed intimacy with both men and women, and had rarely thought about it. Never one to shirk a difficult task, he forced himself to reexamine his sexual activities and attitudes over the past several years.

During the course of the honest but painful review, he came to a few unwelcome conclusions.

An automatic, unthinking door had slammed shut when he realized what Spock had asked. Kirk thought himself a tolerant, broad-minded man, open to new experiences without prejudice, so he was at a loss to understand his immediate rejection of even the thought of playing bottom to Spock's top. He pushed himself past the initial

barrier, began playing with the concept, forcing himself to imagine what it would be like. He pictured himself on hands and knees.

His skin crawled and twitched at that image. Ruthlessly he pressed on, let a faceless male lover enter his picture. As the figure knelt behind him, Kirk's stomach twisted in an icy knot; as hands reached to touch him, an eager cock moving toward him, Kirk exploded to his feet.

For several minutes Kirk stood, breathing hard, before slowly walking up and down the beach until he felt able to continue. In control of himself once more, the Starfleet captain took a hard, objective look at his emotions. It took him many more skittish minutes in his head before he could name the feeling that had caused him to draw back from Spock, one that felt alien to his psyche – fear.

Why was this fear so hard to accept? He wrestled inside for more long minutes before he acknowledged the underlying issue. He feared being vulnerable, letting another have power to control him, physically or emotionally. These were fears that he had never had to face because he never opened himself to that vulnerability.

Kirk returned to the blanket and sat for a while, staring sightlessly out to sea, as he tried to come to terms with his first revelation. Had it truly always been thus? He moved on to consider his past relationships with others. He had always prided himself on making sure that his partners enjoyed the experience as much, if not more, than he did. But had that been enough?

Bitterness of bile touched the back of his throat as Kirk swallowed hard. No, maybe it hadn't been enough for more than the transient pleasures he had sought and won. Always he had been the one in control, the initiator, the aggressor, always the top in sex. Even in his relationship with Spock, he had been the first to openly speak of their feelings, pushing Spock to acknowledge their love, pushing him, although seemingly with Spock's full consent and enthusiasm, into intimacy. Yes, James Kirk had been the first to push, and usually the first to leave all of his previous partners, whether they were casual acquaintances or long-term affairs. He had always told himself that his one true passion was Starfleet and his lover was the Enterprise, but Kirk realized now why it had been so easy to leave those others. Without conscious thought, he had been careful to give only enough of himself to satisfy the needs of the moment. He had always held back, always avoided whatever last, full measure of trust that might tie him to another.

Until now.

Kirk's thoughts turned to Spock. It had taken a long time for them to know each other, longer still to acknowledge their feelings. This was no casual affair between two intense men like themselves; Kirk was convinced that he had finally found the one he would not, could not leave. He and Spock had vowed that rank and their command positions would not be allowed to interfere with their private relationship and vice versa. The Vulcan, having once made the commitment, had kept his side of the bargain, revealing a depth of passion that at times threatened to consume them both. Spock had given him his trust, allowing him to see emotions open to no one else, and Kirk had taken that trust, taken it and willingly embraced it.

But Kirk now had to admit that he had still felt 'in charge', that there was still a little bit of himself that he had kept to himself. And Spock knew it, recognized it. Wanted it. Spock's request forced him to reexamine habits of a lifetime, and his own commitment to their relationship. If he could not reciprocate, could not give a full measure of trust in their physical relationship by putting himself in a position where he felt vulnerable, how could he possibly expect to have full trust in their emotional relationship? For the first time in many years the starship captain was forced to wrestle with demons of personal doubt and uncertainty.

Time and again, Kirk kept circling back to his first reaction to Spock's request. Why did he feel vulnerable? Just what the hell was he really afraid of? He doggedly retraced his steps. He enjoyed being the top, always had. Kirk shook his head, angry; it wasn't just about pleasure. But what then?

What drove James T. Kirk? He pounded a fist on the sand. Power and control, yes. Memories of the Kobayashi Maru test he had rigged so he could win flashed through his mind. So the drive to win, that was part of him, too. But what the hell did that have to do with sex?

Kirk sat up straight and dragged in a slow breath. It had everything to do with sex. Of course, he was the initiator – he admitted to himself he was a hunter, no matter how slick or sophisticated his approach or how sincere his desire to ensure his partner of the moment enjoyed the experience. Winning - that meant he got to be in control. For him at least, topping had come to mean power and control, and he had never questioned that relationship.

Losing control, that was his fear. Without trust, he could not relinquish control, and he had always trusted himself more than anyone else. Kirk's breath stopped altogether for a long moment as he tried to digest that insight.

But Spock? He was not a conquest, although Kirk had pursued the Vulcan all those months, just as he had pursued so many others. Hindsight and brutal honesty forced him to admit that there had been more than one occasion when Spock had made overtures for reciprocity in bed, overtures he had deftly avoided. Ignorance banished, it was time to answer hard questions.

Afternoon shadows lengthened around the lone figure on the sand. Looking up, Kirk recognized the distant form of his first officer as he reappeared at the far point of the cove. His gut clenched as he drew a deep breath. His actions today would change the fundamental nature of their relationship forever. Kirk had never been one to dither when a decision was needed, and he was facing a crucial one now. He knew he loved Spock, but did he trust him as much as he trusted himself? Trust him enough to feel, to *be* vulnerable? It should be a simple thing, nothing more than physical positions and nothing more than he had asked of almost every partner he'd ever had.

Kirk was fairly certain that this wouldn't be a deal breaker, for Spock. But it might be, for himself. He had to look at himself in the mirror every day. And every day, he'd see a man who backed down from the truth, from equality. From Spock. Honesty would not allow him to continue an unequal relationship even though it meant so much to him. It wasn't just positions, either, he knew now. Things would change *outside* of bed, in ways he couldn't imagine or predict. But he had a starship to run, a crew to whom he was responsible, a duty to the fleet...

A lone figure appeared far down the beach. Kirk's thoughts raced, his pulse rose as he watched his first officer's tall figure approach. Kirk stood up and stretched, then gathered up the blanket. Time seemed to crawl by as he waited, forcing himself to patience, forcing himself to breathe.

Spock eventually came to stand in front of him.

There was a long silence before Kirk finally spoke. "I hope you had a nice walk," he said. He felt awkward. He felt himself sweating.

"The exercise was salutary. I also encountered several interesting specimens of local tidal pool life forms," Spock replied.

"Ah, good. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." Kirk swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, and inwardly cursed the pride and fear that made him hesitate.

Another silence.

"The hour is getting late," Spock murmured. He turned toward the cabin. "Shall we retire for a meal?"

Starfleet and his duty to the fleet were excuses he'd used for too long. "Spock."

Spock turned back. Standing almost at attention, he waited.

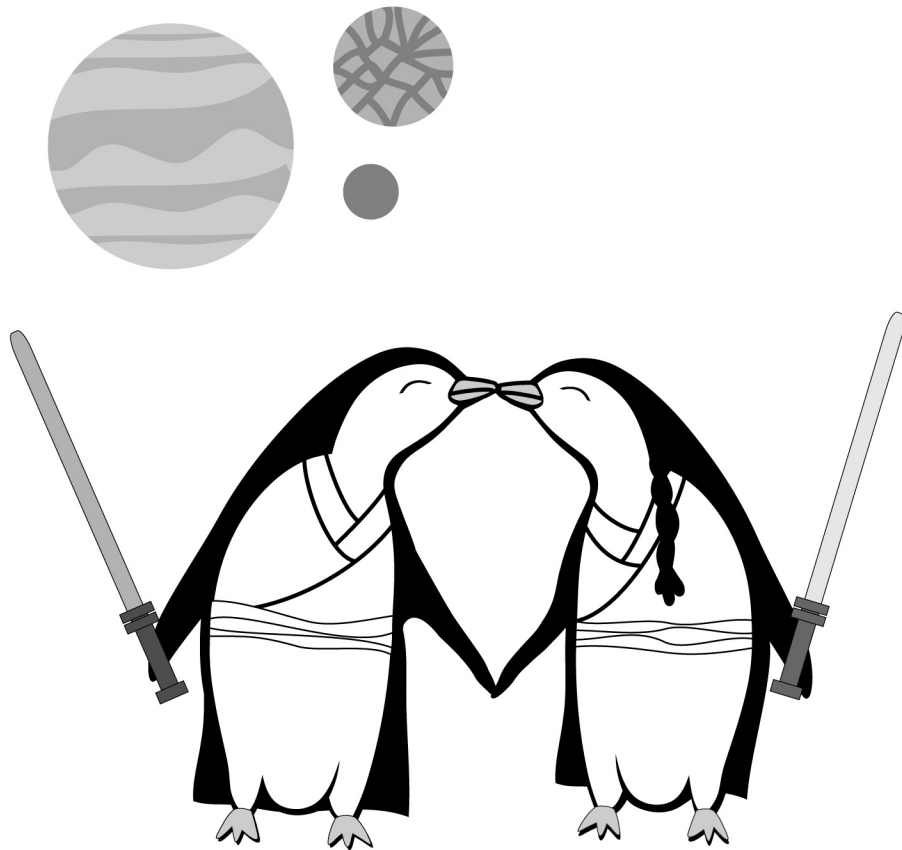
Kirk stepped closer. He gazed up into the hooded eyes and delved beyond the stoic expression into the promises hidden beneath. His heart pounded, breath wisped lightly through parted lips until certainty grew into resolution.

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier," Kirk said. He licked dry lips, then plunged on. "I think you were right about exploring different things in our relationship." A weight seemed to lift from his shoulders as he held out his hand. "I'd like very much to try something different tonight if you're willing."

"Indeed," Spock replied. One corner of his mouth turned up slightly, his obsidian eyes alight with fire as he grasped Kirk's hand, "I would like that also."

Kirk felt the grin spread across his face as his lover led him inside.





Breaking and Making Up by KatBear

Editor's Notes

Katbear shares a story from *The Phantom Menace*, a fandom that burned brightly for many of us—and for many of us, still does. With the upcoming *Star Wars* movies, I expect “old fandoms” will become new again.

Breaking and Making Up

by KatBear

The garden on the outskirts of the Temple area was so dense with greenery they had had to crawl part of the way to reach the hidden clearing. Now the two Jedi knelt, facing each other, ostensibly to begin a deep, shared meditation.

Obi-Wan couldn't focus, and judging by way Qui-Gon looked anywhere but at him, he was having a similar problem. Obi-Wan's heart pounded in a most un-Jedi like manner, and he licked dry lips.

For the last month, the two men had been dancing an odd waltz of aborted touches and uncomfortable silences, interspersed with awkward conversations that ended abruptly. Obi-Wan had grown tired of the game, and desperately wanted to know if Qui-Gon Jinn had finally allowed himself to admit that his feelings for his apprentice had transformed.

He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. "Qui-Gon," said Obi-Wan firmly.

Qui-Gon blinked and focused on Obi-Wan's eyes.

"Qui-Gon. We need to talk." Obi-Wan clenched his hands in his robe sleeves to keep them from trembling. "There is a very important question we need to resolve."

"Padawan, this is not the best time..." Qui-Gon's voice slipped away, but his breath hitched through his nose as he stared at Obi-Wan.

"I love you, Qui-Gon Jinn," Obi-Wan blurted out. The words changed something, broke some silent barrier. He sat frozen, afraid any movement would shatter the moment.

The silence held for four, five heartbeats.

Qui-Gon opened his mouth but no words came out.

Three more heartbeats, as Obi-Wan waited for a reaction, any reaction.

"Obi-Wan," whispered Qui-Gon. He reached out with one hand to touch Obi-Wan's face. "I have waited to hear you say those words."

Neither man remembered much about the next few minutes, except the fierce exultation ringing in the Force.

~ ~ ~

Coruscant, a year later ...

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Obi-Wan knew he had caught the wrong side of Qui-Gon's current obsession yet again. The lights and whoosh of the air traffic behind the landing platform could not hide his master's displeasure as he replied –

"From your point of view..."

Despite the cold, sinking feeling in his body, Obi-Wan felt driven to continue, a sharp poke from the Force that warned him of future peril. "The boy is dangerous... they all sense it. Why can't you?"

"His fate is uncertain, not dangerous. The Council will decide Anakin's future... that should be enough for you." Qui-Gon's forehead furrowed in a slight frown, but his eyes focused somewhere else as he dismissed his apprentice. "Get on board the ship."

Obi-Wan pursed his lips tightly to hold in the words he wanted to say. He gave a slight bow and turned up the ramp of the Naboo spaceship. He pushed away the all-too-familiar words he'd heard Qui-Gon speaking to the young slave boy they had freed, and wished his own focus could change his reality to be somewhere else.

~ ~ ~

The cold of deep space bit sharper than normal in the tiny cabin, or so it felt to Obi-Wan. The chill of Qui-Gon's brusque words at their departure lingered in his mind, making it difficult to meditate during the journey to Naboo. The daytimes were not so bad; they met with the Queen's people to discuss plans and potential strategies, offering

advice and information. Between meetings, Obi-Wan found tasks to keep himself occupied.

The few hours Qui-Gon was not working with the Queen and her security team now belonged to Anakin Skywalker rather than him, though. It was not that Qui-Gon was angry or rude to him – it was more that his master seemed to be elsewhere. And in all fairness, he couldn't fault the boy. It was hardly Anakin's fault that he was here, and the lad clearly felt the cold and separation from his mother keenly. Even so, none of that assuaged Obi-Wan's own feelings of loneliness and frustration.

The morning of their expected arrival on Naboo was no different, and Obi-Wan felt even more abandoned. He sat on the bunk and stared at the chrono's calendar that marked the one-year anniversary of that glorious day when they had finally declared their love for each other deep in the gardens of the Temple. He sighed; this was definitely not the way he had anticipated marking the occasion. They were on a mission, so of course there would never have been an overt celebration. They had both agreed that discretion and devotion to duty were essential, although Qui-Gon always made sure that the infrequent times off were well worth waiting for. But his current apparent indifference cut deeply.

Qui-Gon stopped by to pick up a datapad. "Is everything packed, Padawan?"

"Yes, Master." Obi-Wan stood up. "I've checked all of our equipment, and coordinated with Captain Panaka. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, that will be fine. Thank you." Qui-Gon started to leave, hesitated a moment. "We will probably be very busy once we land, so you may have the time until we prepare to touch down for your own." He gave a quick, lopsided half-smile as he nodded briefly and left.

Obi-Wan's heart had leapt for a moment when Qui-Gon looked as if he'd been about to say something different, but the normally welcome offer of free time was not what he had wanted to hear. He closed his eyes and stood silently for several minutes, grappling with his feelings. A snippet of overheard conversation chased around in his head: Qui-Gon's admonition to Anakin about learning to live in the moment. The words brought images of Qui-Gon from other times and places, missions they had worked on together, joys and sorrows they had shared, and the day Qui-Gon Jinn had revealed he loved his apprentice. Qui-Gon's little smile, so characteristic for him when he was not fully engaged, lingered longest.

Finally, he opened his eyes. He unhooked his lightsaber and gazed down on it as the Force jabbed at him. He snorted as he thought about what had happened the past few days.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said aloud. "You are a Jedi. A Senior Padawan. You shouldn't be moping around like a youngling who's had his candy taken away. And damnit, it is as it should be that Qui-Gon is my master first, and my lover a distant second. If anybody knows what the damned man is like, it ought to be me, and I know that when he gets engrossed by something, that's all he thinks about." Obi-Wan tightened his hold on the 'saber. "I don't believe he meant to hurt me; he's just being his usual Force-benighted self. One way or another, we'll get past this, like we've gotten past other problems." His shoulders straightened, and he put his lightsaber back on his belt.

Having been given leave by his master, Obi-Wan decided to take advantage of the privilege. By now, he had a good knowledge of the crowded Naboo ship, and sought a small supply closet he had found. He unlocked the door, knelt on the floor and prepared to meditate.

The thirty-minute warning alarm went off three hours later. Obi-Wan roused, stood and stretched. He had a tiny smile on his face and a confident thrust to his steps as he went to gather their packs for the landing.

~ ~ ~

After the hustle and bustle of a safe landing and final meetings, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan found a quiet spot among the trees as the Naboo continued their preparations.

"Jar Jar is on his way to the Gungan city, Master," reported Obi-Wan.

"Good," replied Qui-Gon, although his distant stare clearly indicated his thoughts were elsewhere.

The silence stretched.

Obi-Wan shifted his weight, filled the silence with a question. "Do you think the Queen's plan will work?"

"The Gungans will not easily be swayed, and we cannot use our power to help her."

Qui-Gon was still looking out into the forest. Obi-Wan had determined that he must take this opportunity to do whatever was necessary to try to right things with his master and lover, so he steeled himself to speak.

"I'm... I'm sorry for my behavior, Master. It is not my place to disagree with you about the boy. I am grateful that you think I am ready for the Trials."

Qui-Gon seemed to gather himself and focused on his apprentice, looking at him directly as if seeing him anew after a long separation.

"You have been a good apprentice. You are much wiser than I am, Obi-Wan. I foresee you will become a great Jedi Knight."

"If I make any sort of a knight, it will be due to your teaching, Master." Obi-Wan ducked his head a little. "I'm not feeling particularly endowed with wisdom at the moment, though."

Qui-Gon smiled, the first genuine smile that had graced his lips in days. "You certainly have other endowments, however."

Obi-Wan looked up. Had his master just said what he thought he had heard? The beginning of a grin twitched his lips.

"I've been obsessing again, haven't I?" Qui-Gon sighed before looking around the area and listening for a moment to the Naboo soldiers clanging about. "Walk with me, Obi-Wan."

A slow warmth filled Obi-Wan as Qui-Gon trod so closely their arms brushed on every step. He didn't want to push too hard until he understood what Qui-Gon intended, but his anticipation grew as they moved further into the forest. After twenty minutes of companionable silence, they stopped in a small clearing far enough away that no sounds of war intruded.

Qui-Gon took a slow, deep breath as he turned to his apprentice. His hands remained in his sleeves as he briefly inclined his head. "I owe you an apology, Obi-Wan. I have neglected you, but I can only plead that the Force told me the Skywalker boy is important, and that it was critical that I do something about him. I know you don't agree, but I shouldn't have shut you out as I did. And I should have talked to you about taking your Trials earlier. For all that, I am truly sorry."

"It's alright, Master. I've been meditating on what has happened these last few days, and I accept that you were sincere in your beliefs. I know your connection to the Force is strong, and I should have understood earlier why you acted as you did." Obi-Wan hesitated a moment. "I must also confess that I'm not certain I am actually ready for my Trials, Master. There is still so much I need to learn, and I was looking forward to learning those things from you."

"That is a valid concern, Obi-Wan, but you have come much further than you realize, even though

I don't always remember to tell you so." Qui-Gon shrugged. "As for learning, that is a life-long pursuit. I know I myself still have much to learn." Qui-Gon stepped in close and put a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "I have been thinking about your readiness for some time, however, and I should have discussed it with you before now. Perhaps I was reluctant because it would mean sundering our training bond, but I do believe you are ready." He leaned in even further and whispered in Obi-Wan's ear. "I am sure you will pass, my Obi-Wan. And I would be greatly honored if you would consider a life bond with me after you are knighted."

Obi-Wan stood paralyzed for a moment as he tried to digest Qui-Gon's words. He blinked, gasped, and his stomach turned cartwheels as the words penetrated.

"Qui-Gon!" Obi-Wan wrapped his arms around Qui-Gon. "Force, yes!" He buried his head in Qui-Gon's chest.

Obi-Wan wasn't sure how much time passed before Qui-Gon gently put a little space between them. He looked up into Qui-Gon's blue eyes, which darkened even as he watched.

"It will be hours before the Naboo are ready to move out, and they won't need us for a while," said Qui-Gon. He raised one eyebrow as he softly stroked Obi-Wan's braid with the back of one finger.

Obi-Wan grinned, stepped back and started to shrug out of his cloak.

They moved apart long enough to find a soft spot in the long green grass and spread their cloaks on the ground. Utility belts followed, although both Jedi automatically unhooked their lightsabers and set them aside so they would be within easy reach if needed.

As Obi-Wan turned, long fingers captured his face. He stood, lips slightly parted, as Qui-Gon slowly traced the contours of his face with feather-light touches, heavy with promise. His breath hitched as one fingertip slipped under his chin and wandered beneath the edge of his tunic. He tilted his head up in invitation, closed his eyes and let his tongue peek out.

"Force, Obi-Wan... do you have any idea what that does to me?"

The deep, husky tone made Obi-Wan's mouth go dry, and he licked his lips. He let his hips swing forward and waited expectantly, knowing full well that his lover's blood was heating up just as fast as his own.

The embrace and crushing kiss sent Obi-Wan's temperature from simmer to boil. He grabbed Qui-Gon and held tight as the kiss went on, hungry, needy. Obi-Wan pushed back just as hard, submerging himself in the moment, oblivious to anything else. They both gasped as the kiss finally ended.

"I've missed that," said Obi-Wan.

"As have I." Qui-Gon pressed a gentler kiss on Obi-Wan's forehead, then began feathering kisses over his face.

A shiver ran through Obi-Wan as Qui-Gon licked his ear, tongue swirling around and around before he repeated the treatment on his other ear. When Qui-Gon moved back to his mouth for a deep kiss, tongues slipping against each other, Obi-Wan's knees grew weak and he had to hold on tight to have any hope of remaining upright.

Strong arms gathered the apprentice in and laid him down on the cloaks atop the soft grass. Obi-Wan felt warm and cherished as he reached up to run a hand through the soft hair that hung down when Qui-Gon leaned in for another kiss.

"Want more." Obi-Wan pushed up, leaning on one elbow, as Qui-Gon obligingly shifted onto his back. Obi-Wan attacked the bare skin below Qui-Gon's neck, licking, kissing, working his way down to the vee of his tunics. He sat across Qui-Gon's hips and impatiently pulled at the cloth at Qui-Gon's waist holding the tunics together, until he triumphantly exposed his lover's lean muscular upper body. Obi-Wan dived in and feasted on the offering. He ran his fingers across the expanse of flesh, reveling in the smoothness, gentling the scars, finally allowing himself to flick his tongue across the dark nipples until they rose to his bidding. The faint moan from above when he suckled and nipped the hardened nubs sent his pulse racing another tick faster.

Obi-Wan rose to his knees when Qui-Gon pushed, balancing on his hands without relinquishing his concentration on his task. He barely noticed as his own tunics were loosened, continuing to lick and suck across his lover's broad chest, leaving an occasional red circle in his wake.

"Up a moment, love."

Blinking, Obi-Wan realized his eyes had been closed. He shifted his weight upward. He squirmed out of his tunics and tossed them aside. A cool, errant breeze rippled across his body, and his nipples flushed and hardened of their own accord, making him pull in a deep breath.

"By all the gods, you are beautiful." Qui-Gon's voice had gone even deeper and huskier as he stared upward.

Obi-Wan grinned and wiggled his hips. "You want some of this?" he purred.

Qui-Gon didn't bother to respond with words. He surged upward and seized Obi-Wan in a bear hug, rolling them both together so he ended up on top.

"Force!" Obi-Wan gasped as bare flesh rubbed against bare flesh. He eagerly returned Qui-Gon's caresses as their hands roamed freely, moaning into the kiss as their tongues danced together. His gut was tingling in anticipation as Qui-Gon's hips pressed downward. The layers of cloth could not disguise the growing hardness and heat between them.

Frenzied lust grew more acute as his cock grew stiffer. Obi-Wan held Qui-Gon's head between his hands and looked into the lust-darkened eyes. "Want you," he groaned hoarsely as he thrust his hips upward.

Qui-Gon breathed just as hard as he ran his tongue around his lips. "Together," he whispered, "make love together."

Obi-Wan nodded as Qui-Gon slipped off of him and began to move his body around into one of their favorite poses. He wiped sweat off his face with a bare hand, working hard to restrain himself for the few seconds it took Qui-Gon to turn and for him to shift onto his side so they were facing each other's groins.

They grabbed for leggings, shifting and wiggling until cloth was pulled down far enough to free eager cocks.

A jolt of light surged from Obi-Wan's balls up through his spine as Qui-Gon wrapped a hand around his cock and kissed its tip. He had to pause for a moment as his stomach muscles contracted, trying to get a breath. He focused on the prize in front of him and drew a groan from his lover as he took Qui-Gon's rampant erection into both hands and sucked.

The skin of Qui-Gon's cock felt of silk over iron as Obi-Wan licked along the entire length. He closed his eyes and moaned as Qui-Gon reciprocated. He ran his tongue along, over and around Qui-Gon's cock, pausing occasionally to tease the leaking slit, and struggled to maintain his presence when Qui-Gon returned each stroke in kind.

Obi-Wan's hands were slick with sweat, and he could barely hear Qui-Gon over the blood that thundered in his ears. Sparks flared randomly inside him. He shouted when Qui-Gon grabbed his balls and squeezed, simultaneously taking Obi-Wan's cock deep into his mouth.

Pressured fever built rapidly, as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon continued their mutual oral worship. Obi-Wan could not keep his hips from jerking, moaning as Qui-Gon wrapped an arm around him and held him tight, fingers pressed hard across his bare ass.

Obi-Wan could not suck Qui-Gon's cock as deeply as Qui-Gon could take his, but with his last dregs of control he unleashed his secret weapon in their love-making. Going down as far as he could without choking, Obi-Wan began to hum. Qui-Gon's organ grew to its hardest as his moans rumbled around Obi-Wan's cock.

Faster and faster they worked. Obi-Wan had to hold onto Qui-Gon's hip with one desperate arm as they surged against each other. Fire raced through his veins and his balls burned with the need to release.

"Ungh ..." moaned Obi-Wan as he pulled and sucked, trying to ensure Qui-Gon went over the top with him. He was undone when a finger plunged into his opening and white fire exploded behind his eyes. He stiffened and cried out, the sound muffled by the organ in his mouth. Hot fluid squirted into his mouth as he squeezed with one hand and time stopped.

Obi-Wan was breathing hard as he regained awareness of the bliss that filled him. He shivered as he felt Qui-Gon tenderly licking his deflated penis, and reached forward to seek the final remnants of his lover's orgasm, using his tongue to lovingly clean away every trace. With a last kiss, he let go and rolled onto his back to stare up through the branches at a beautiful blue sky.

Beside him, Qui-Gon shifted around until he could lean over and gently caress Obi-Wan's lips with his own.

"I love you, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon said softly. "Whatever else might happen between us and to us, remember that."

"I love you, too." Obi-Wan propped himself up on an elbow to look at Qui-Gon. "I know I'm still learning that neither of us is perfect, and our duties can make life difficult, but the one thing I will never doubt is our love."

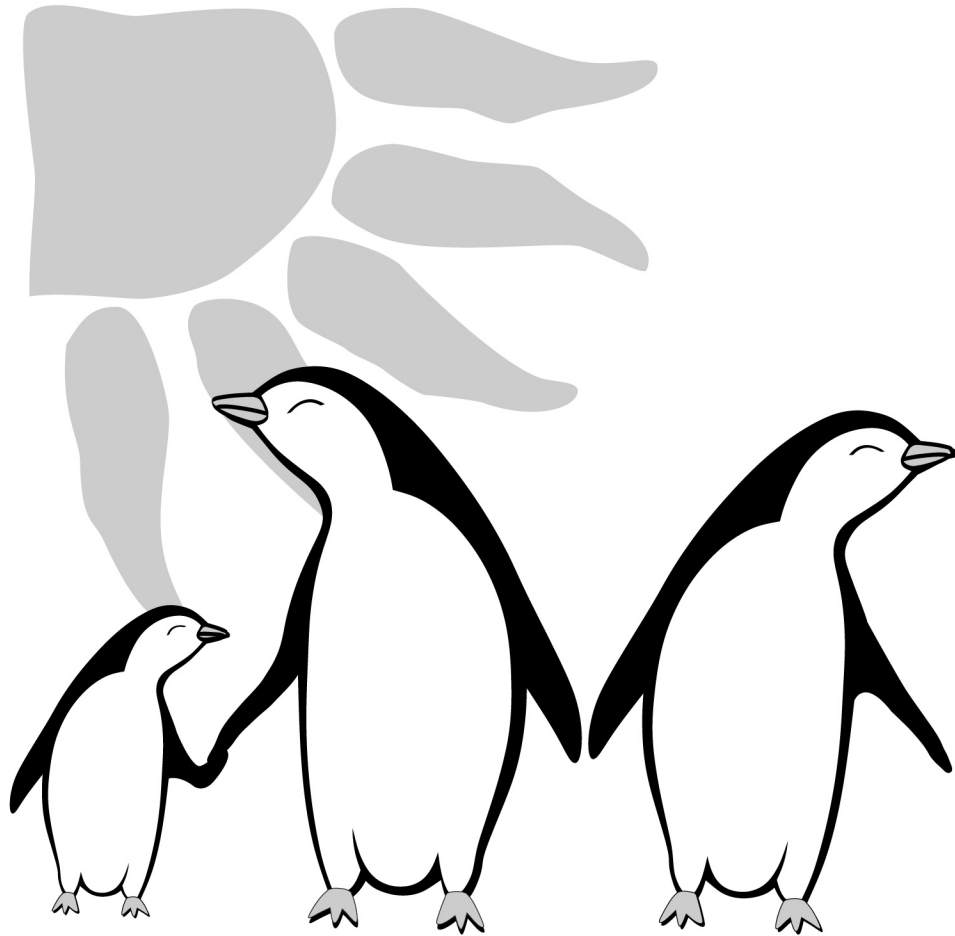
"And our love will only grow stronger after you are knighted, and we can be bonded. I look forward to that day with all my heart."

"As do I, my love." Obi-Wan rested a finger on his lips and then pressed it to Qui-Gon's. "Until then."

Qui-Gon nodded. "We should be getting back."

"Yes, Master." Obi-Wan slipped easily back into their respective roles as Jedi, but his heart sang with joy as they dressed. The promise of their future happiness put a smile on his lips, and a swagger back into his step as they headed back through the forest to face the coming battle on Naboo.





Small Packages

by Rhi

Editor's Notes

This story is neither slash nor does it contain anniversaries, and yet it was written with a looong span of fannish years in mind. Rhi combines a very old fandom (the *Highlander* movie) with a very new fandom that is nonetheless set in a bygone era (*Agent Carter*). She evokes girl power and women's work, and her story reminded that one needn't be female to believe women are people too. It's a well-characterized look into the lives of two iconic fannish figures.

Small Packages

by Rhi

The woman slipped into the courtyard warily, using more caution than even the unbarred gate should have inspired. Connor MacLeod approved.

The house had been proud once, before the village around it began to sag back into woodlands under the pressure of war, depression, and now invasion. Now it stood silent, if not entirely empty. This latest intruder paused just to the side of the gate, her red-brown clothes blending into the sunbaked wood of the post. Her gaze flicked from corner to corner, ground to roof, window to basement door, alert despite the circles under her eyes and the dried blood staining one sleeve. Her scan barely hesitated when she took in the bodies discarded on the paving stones between gate and front door, but she didn't check the full circuit behind her.

Whoever she was, she was too watchful to have missed something so obvious.

Trouble.

Connor eased back a little further into the woods around the house, careful to blend in with the trees. It cost him his view of the stranger, but left her in earshot. Of course, that meant so was he; he'd have to keep it in mind.

A few silent yards more took him back to Rachel. She was still waiting where he'd left her, hidden off to the side of a maple whose brilliant leaves would draw the eye away from her. Connor slid down to one knee and touched her shoulder for comfort and reassurance. The little girl looked up at him, blue eyes wide but silent and uncomplaining. Connor couldn't resist smiling at her, which explained everything about why he'd been smuggling them both across France in wartime. Her first family had tried to hide her from the Nazis. Connor had found her just before the Germans did and ended up her second family.

He waved Rachel farther back into the tangle of underbrush with his free hand – she didn't flinch at the knife in his other hand – and closed his

fingers around his thumb to indicate she should hide.

Rachel smiled back at him, her thin, dirty fingers signaling V for victory to some; from her it was 'bunny ears' and 'curl up and hide like one.' She did just that, the too-large, grass-stained brown coat pulled up over the dirty gold of her hair to help a little girl become a small hummock of grass and earth. Connor eased a fallen branch over her to shelter her further and slid back towards the road and the Fontaine house.

He crouched by a stone retaining wall, listening more than watching now. The woman was moving inside the courtyard, barely audible on the stone and packed earth. Someone else was walking much more noisily along the side of the road.

The newcomer wasn't really used to the country; he'd thought visibility on the road was his main problem. It wasn't. He was huffing for breath and accompanied by the crackle of leaves and snap of twigs. Apparently, even he could tell he was too loud. He kept slowing down, but that did no good when every bit of forest life around him kept falling silent.

Connor drifted silently away from the stone wall, timing his motions to the periodic breezes that swayed thinly-veiled oaks and the occasional fir. He had no choice but to move slowly; most of the leaves were damp and going to compost, but here and there the sun had dried some back to crispness and they'd crackle under foot if he wasn't careful.

He came to rest under an evergreen, looking out and around to actually sight his target in the late afternoon sunlight. Pursued and pursuer, hmm? The odds suggested one would be supporting the Nazis and the other would be Resistance.

It might not matter which was which. Help would be nice, but Connor would kill both of them if that was what it took to get Rachel safely out of France.

The second stranger came around a shell-stricken chestnut tree without enough care for the way his coat showed him up against his surroundings. He was sturdily built, his face broad and maybe a day away from being bearded instead of unshaven. Despite the stubble and the flattened nose, his clothes were too bright for occupied France, his skin too clean. At least he looked like he'd missed a few meals. Nowhere close to as many as everyone else in the area, however.

To have Rene Fontaine's prize bowler on his head, still with blood on the brim, the man had to have been in the house. Most likely he'd killed the Fontaines; at best, he'd left the bodies where they lay as bait. But he hadn't disarmed the traps left under them, either. So. Not likely Resistance.

Connor put his friends' deaths aside again and waited for the enemy agent to come into arm's reach.

It took another four minutes but eventually Connor stained the bastard's crimson coat with darker red blood, eyes narrowing as he took in the contrast. From the look of that, the man had been eating much better than Connor had managed for Rachel. Connor pulled his hand off the corpse's mouth, his knife out of the man's kidney, and stripped off his pack.

He wasn't all that surprised to find a German undershirt under the coat, or German military ID that matched the face of the newly deceased. Officer's insignia, however, worried him.

He ghosted back across the road, refusing to think about what food the heavy bag might hold, and went to retrieve his new daughter.

~ ~ ~

Peggy Carter glanced quickly around the walled-off yard. When she didn't see anyone watching from the house – and really, who'd set this up? There were few good sightlines to watch the bait, much though she hated to call the dead that – she moved to the pile of corpses, checking for traps. Two grenades had been left for the merciful. If she'd been less careful disarming those, she'd have been blown apart by the larger charges of explosive they concealed.

'Stiff upper lip,' she thought, mouth and spine straightening as she raided her former contacts' bodies for money, ammunition, or anything else of use. She took what she could of the trap munitions, too. The Fontaines would have supplied her with what they could spare if she'd made it while they were alive. Peggy tried to tell herself this was no different and settled for promising herself a good cry later, if she lived that long.

She still hadn't found the papers she'd come for when the birds fell completely silent. The wind had fallen off, too, which allowed Peggy to hear a sound she knew too well.

That chuff of expelled air meant a man was dying in the woods along the road. The man who'd been following her for at least a mile? Maybe. But if so, who had killed him, and why?

Peggy shifted to get her back into a corner, pulled her pistol and waited. The silence stretched, thinned, sharpened to something painful, and then she heard a high-pitched squeak. It was followed, a moment later, by a baritone bellow trying to command a small girl to return. His order turned into a howl of pain, one which shifted quickly to rage and was followed by gunshots.

Peggy ignored her torn fingers, the way her muscles felt like wire strung too thin and too tight for their load, the nails that ripped as she scaled a wall theoretically too tall for such maneuvers. She dug into old wood and crumbling mortar and created handholds to go up and over. The man snarled again as Peggy crested the wall... then screamed like a pig being castrated.

Peggy didn't care about him. What drove her to a sprint was the silence from the little girl.

Behind the abandoned household, a man lay curled on the ground in a German uniform tunic painted with blood; more blood spurted with his every panicked heartbeat. Beyond him, another German soldier was trying to catch a child whose arm was also covered in blood. As Peggy ran, he steadied his pistol to shoot her – and the girl darted forward under his hands.

Instead of shooting, he jumped to the side, clamping his legs together hastily as he did. The little girl had turned back to watch him, eyes huge in her too-thin face but teeth set in her lower lip and her jaw set stubbornly.

He screamed, landing gracelessly. He curled around his injured leg, trying to wrap a hand over the gash that ran across his calf and reappeared midway up his thigh.

Peggy tackled his arm, got control of his pistol, and shoved it into his chest as she pulled the trigger.

It didn't kill him immediately, so she steadied her hand and pressed the barrel just right of his sternum, between ribs, before she fired again. His eyes faded from alive and inhabited to dead and vacant. Peggy rolled off him, cursing herself for wasting ammunition. The thought had barely formed when she noticed motion out of the corner of her eye: the little girl was moving to flank her.

She was small, an underfed six or seven year old, but she had a knife in one hand as long as the forearm it lay against and razor-sharp from the cuts it had put in the Germans. The thin fingers around it were white from the tight grip, but the girl's hand was barely shaking.

Peggy started to hold her hands out... and lowered the gun to the ground instead.

The girl looked past her and was suddenly young again and horribly relieved. She darted around Peggy, staying well out of arm's reach, and started a remarkably quiet tale. In Dutch, unfortunately. Damn.

Peggy turned slowly, her hands still out, and met a cold, contemplative stare from a killer in dark brown and tan mufti. He scooped the little girl up onto what hip he had – not on the side with his knife – and went back to looking Peggy over. The appraisal was too calculating to be sexual, but offensive nonetheless. After a long minute, the man asked in French, “How long until the moon's dark?”

A Resistance password didn't surprise Peggy, but she hadn't expected it either. She answered anyway, with complete honesty above and beyond the pass phrase. “Not soon enough.”

He nodded once. “I wondered. Do you always rescue little girls?”

Peggy tilted her head to give him the glare she'd perfected years before on her brothers. “She was rescuing herself quite competently. I merely gave her a hand. She was fearless and competent when she had to be. We need more such women.”

That got a quick smile and for a moment Peggy could see why the little girl trusted him. Then he shifted the girl to a safer perch on his side – she wrapped her hands through the straps of his pack, ignoring the blood it smeared on them – and asked, “Did you find whatever you came for?”

Peggy ignored that. Her mission was not his business, possibly the more so because the intel was lost with M. Fontaine's death. This stranger might make a good traveling companion, however. He'd kept a small girl alive and safe in occupied France; she seemed to be learning to be quite dangerous from him. Peggy factored those in, added the dictum about keeping one's friends and enemies close, and suggested, “We could move more easily as a family.”

To Peggy's surprise, he sought the girl's opinion, first commenting and then asking something. The girl looked Peggy over carefully, too, from the wrecked state of Peggy's hair to the blood coating one arm. Her right arm, just like the girl's. She nodded finally, and her companion? Father? did the same.

“We need to clean up and get out of here. We'll sort out routes and destinations after that.”

Peggy nodded her acceptance of both his offer and his priorities. “Agreed.” She held out her still-bloody hand. “I'm Lachance, Jeanne Lachance.”

The man shook it with a hand slightly less stained. “Smith. John Smith.” His smile bared too many teeth and they hadn't exactly traded a blood oath, but Peggy smiled at him anyway.

It was a very straightforward lie. She could work with that.

~ ~ ~

Connor wasn't surprised that Rachel waited until full night to ask her questions: full night, another ten miles away, and relative safety. They were bedded down on old straw covered with older blankets in a partially collapsed stone hut probably built a few centuries before Connor's birth. Despite the small fire they'd built to cook the sausages in the German officer's pack, the whole shelter still smelt primarily of unwashed farmers and animal droppings.

“You said they were friends,” Rachel said quietly, nibbling at her share of dinner. (The woman calling herself Lachance had only raised an eyebrow when Connor waved a hand over it and promised Rachel it was veal. All of them knew it was mostly pork, but Rachel nodded solemnly and ate it without complaint. Lachance hadn't commented on Rachel being Jewish or Connor... not.)

Connor answered both what Rachel had said and what she meant. “They were friends, Rachel. But if we'd stayed to bury them, the Germans would know someone had been there. More soldiers might even have gotten there while we were still digging. Rene and Ghyslaine were true friends; they'd want us to go on living.”

Rachel nodded, then winced as Lachance kept working another knot out of her hair. She held still for it, though; Lachance didn't pull her hair nearly as often as Connor still did. “But we hid the soldiers' bodies so they won't know we were there?” Her French needed some work, and Lachance murmured it to her again, so Rachel could repeat it with a better accent.

“Their officers will know where they were supposed to be.” Connor let some of his amusement into his voice so Rachel could relax a little. “But they won't be sure that the soldiers *went* where they were supposed to be.”

His new daughter smiled at him, as close to a giggle as she'd managed yet. “Like the

neighborhood boys who'd run errands and end up halfway across the village from the shops their mamas sent them to?"

Lachance said approvingly, "Exactly like that." Rachel smiled at her, too, finished her sausage, and wiped her hands on the old blanket.

Connor waited until the comb ran smoothly through her hair to say, "You did well in the fight, Rachel. You're still *here*, and that's how you win. But how did it go?" Lachance's head came up in reflexive protest – the name amused Connor; he doubted she was either French or fond of trusting luck – but she kept her mouth shut. Connor kept his attention primarily on Rachel, however, as he asked, "Do you want to talk about it and see what other right ways there might have been?"

Rachel said shyly, "I cut them when they didn't expect it, and I kept the knife against my arm like you showed me."

Connor nodded. "You did a very good job with that. I know it's messier and harder to clean up later, but they don't see the blade as fast when it's against your arm. They think a blade should face forward in your hand, where it'll show. That gives you a few seconds to get to them while they still think you're unarmed."

Rachel nodded. "It really worked. And then the second man had a gun, so I stayed close to him like you said I should, and I ducked when he shot at me, and I turned to see if I had to get close again after he shot."

Lachance kept combing Rachel's hair just to soothe her. It made Connor like the woman a little more. "You did a very good job, too," she told Rachel. "The soldier had no idea what to do when you were inside his reach like that. Most men don't fight like that."

"The little ones do, Dada says," Rachel told her and Connor grinned at her, the instinctive smile she'd drawn since they'd first met. Connor's first family had rejected him for reviving; Rachel had accepted his survival. Her first family had tried to keep her safe; Connor was still trying.

"Some of them do, yes. So? What are the main rules?" He counted them out on his fingers with her as she said them.

Rachel recited, "Don't let them hurt me. Don't let me hurt me. Stop them as much as I have to, and if I have to kill them, then they shouldn't have threatened a little girl. Don't get fancy." She closed her hand into a fist. "Just stay alive." She smiled at him and gave him the rabbit ears again. "And if I can hide, there's nothing wrong with that."

Connor leaned in and hugged her fiercely. "Good girl. You're here; you stayed alive. You did very, very well."

Rachel wrapped her arms around him – too thin to make him happy, but he'd try to feed her up when they got to New York – and cuddled in. "Can I sleep next to you tonight?"

"Of course. Right between me and the wall, so no one can come up on you," Connor suggested, and Rachel nodded.

Lachance started arranging a little nest for her. "I'll take first watch." She shifted to English to argue it with him and won by pointing out, "You'll hear me if I move too much on this straw, but you can't have gotten much sleep getting a little girl across France."

"After I get those splinters out of your fingers, I'll nap." He gave her a sardonic look. "Easier with help, and it's in my best interest for you to be able to fight if necessary."

Rachel asked sleepily in French, "Miss Lachance? Can you show me how you do your lipstick tomorrow? I'll help comb *your* hair if you like."

That got an immediate smile. "Of course, Rachel. I'd like that. Sleep well."

Connor rubbed her back until she went limp; if he didn't know how small children did that even in peacetime, it would have worried him. As it was, he looked over at Lachance and said quietly, "You killed the second one for her. Thank you."

"He was bleeding quite badly, but you're most welcome." She looked at him very thoughtfully and then asked, "Are those really the rules you fight by?"

Connor snorted. "You can't win another day if you don't live to see it. Stay alive. Then win." He gave her his coldest smile, pleased when she didn't back away from it. "But I follow *both* parts of that rule."

"I knew about staying inside their reach, but I wouldn't have thought of diving under the gun like that."

Connor shrugged. "You're bigger than she is, but you're no Amazon. And no one expects you to dive towards the gun. It works once. You have to kill them then, because it won't work more than twice." He considered. "Well. Maybe three times. If they're idiots."

"When fighting women, many men are," she said dryly. "Don't get fancy?"

Apparently she wanted a free tutorial... but she was helping him keep Rachel alive, and she'd had

the Resistance counterword. So he'd tell her. If she could absorb it, fine.

"Exactly. Don't extend too far from your body, whether it's a kick or a punch. Don't grab for a bigger gun you don't know how to use if you already have a pistol. If they're right there, don't try to knee them in the balls – they expect that from a woman. Headbutt them. You'll give yourself a headache, but they'll never expect it and *then* you can go for the balls. They'll be unprotected at that point."

"Where were you when they were training me?" Lachance muttered and it wasn't entirely sarcastic. Good. She was listening.

"Not there, so it doesn't matter," Connor said flatly. "Keep listening. You heard her tell us the essentials. Now we extrapolate. Go for the eyes only after you've distracted them; everyone tries to protect their eyes. Taking them out works, but it has to be part two of the maneuver. Go for joints and destroy them if you can. Not just the knees, although those are good. Take out ankles, elbows, wrists. If they can't run, they can't chase you. If they can't grab a gun or aim it, they can't kill you." He looked at her. "Take out throats as part three. If they can't breathe, or can't free a hand for fear of bleeding out, they can't kill you."

Connor studied her but she was still listening. He nodded. "Good. If you're fighting for your life, there are no rules. Not past, 'Live.'"

Lachance studied him as seriously as he was studying her, then she said quietly, "If we find shelter sooner tomorrow, can you start showing me? After you're done working with Rachel, of course. But you're keeping her alive. I can't imagine you don't have a few nasty tricks I could stand to learn, too. Hearing it and trying to imagine the moves just isn't the same as working it into the muscles."

Connor pulled out his knife and held it in the fire. "After Rachel's done, yes. You'll want this sterilized for your hands. We'll work on kicks, stomps, and sweeps if there's time tomorrow. Give you a little longer for your fingers to heal."

She just nodded, all pragmatism, and dug in her pack for cleaner cloth for bandages. "That sounds perfect."

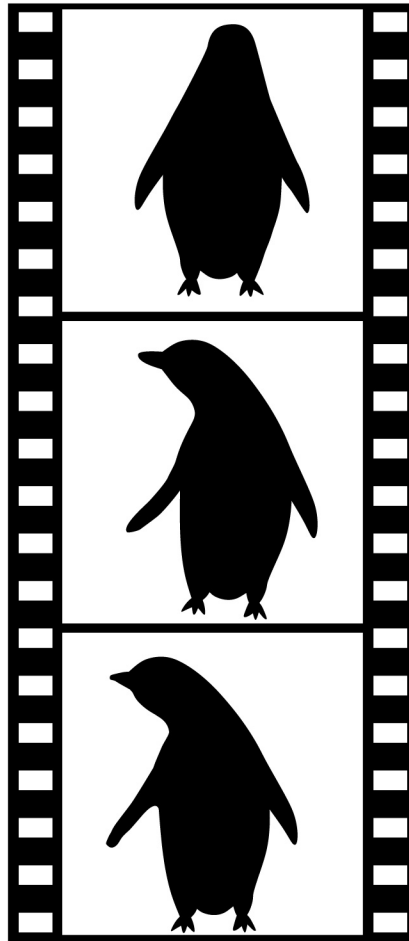


Author's Notes

Connor MacLeod and Rachel (later Rachel Ellenstein) are both from the movie Highlander, which will be thirty years old next year. (Now I feel old.) Connor found Rachel hidden in an old warehouse in one of the deleted scenes from the movie; that he ended up taking her back to New York is canon.

Peggy Carter, from the Captain America movies and her own TV mini-series, is still with the OSS at this point, not yet the SSR.

And Peggy's mission? The intel was hidden inside a false lining of Rene Fontaine's bowler hat. No one found it.



Will You Let Your Cities Crumble by Mead

Editor's Notes

Mead did something amazing; she heard the story submission deadline had passed, emailed with me for two days, and then wrote a 16,000-word *Professionals* story in five days because she had never been published in a zine before. (I think the zine is the real winner, here.)

Will You Let Your Cities Crumble

by Mead

“Nuclear waste in the tube tunnels and on parts of the national rail network.” Cowley’s tone was brisk. “It’s not getting there by accident. Someone’s putting it there.”

Bodie watched the Cow as he paced to the window of his office. The London rain blew hard against the window, which rattled, and Bodie regretted the absence of a tea tray on the desk. Doyle had draped himself against his favourite filing cabinet, his wide-eyed gaze fixed on Cowley. Bodie carefully kept his eyes away from his partner, concentrating on the matter at hand.

“Sabotage, sir? Terrorism? The Russians?”

“Who knows, Bodie? But it’s the twenty-fifth anniversary of the formation of CND this year, and intelligence suggests some members may be getting impatient.”

“CND?” Doyle’s tone was incredulous.

“Apparently.” Cowley glared impartially at them. “So I want you two out there marching for a nuclear-free world before Big Ben starts to glow at night and the fish in the Serpentine start walking.”

“CND?” Doyle wasn’t usually so slow on the uptake.

“Yes, Doyle. What’s the matter with you? It’s a simple job for you lads – aye, Doyle, especially for you. With your hair you could walk into a meeting tonight and no-one would question you.”

Through the corner of his eye, Bodie watched Doyle open his mouth to reply, catch himself, and resort to glowering instead. The man had a lovely way of arranging himself, casual but focussed at the same time. Bodie told himself firmly to keep his mind in the office, and not in the bedroom.

“Yes, sir.” Doyle had composed himself.

“Is that the file?” Bodie reached out for the green folder in Cowley’s hand.

“That’s the outline. You can get the rest of the files from Betty. There may be more to come. I’m trying to get a line on them from Five at the moment – they’re bound to have a man or two inside, they like to penetrate all the subversive organisations.”

Bodie heard Doyle stifle a snort.

“Doyle?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Good. So we’re waiting for Five, and the Met have been told to co-operate. They don’t know what it’s about at the moment.”

“Their normal state of affairs, sir. They never do.”

“Bodie!” Doyle and Cowley echoed each other. Bodie grinned, flapped the file at Doyle, and ushered him out.

Back in the cubbyhole that served as an office, Bodie regarded Doyle with amusement. “Okay, what was all that about?”

“All what?”

“That. With the Cow. About your hair.”

Doyle ran his hand through his hair by reflex. “Oh. Yeah.” He looked belligerent for a moment and then shrugged. “If that’s his level of preparation, that doesn’t bode well. Not everyone in the anti-nuclear lobby’s got long hair.”

Bodie was ready to accept that, but Doyle carried on.

“Or votes Labour. Or is vegetarian. Or wears sandals. Or drives a 2CV. Or avoids holidaying in Spain. Franco,” he appended, when Bodie frowned a question at him. “Okay, yeah, that was the seventies. Sociology teachers. Ramblers Society. Yoghurt. Guardian reader. Fair trade coffee. Church bazaars. All that.” He flapped a hand.

“All right, about 70% of them probably are one of those at least, but that’s still a lot who aren’t. And anyway, CND spreading nuclear waste? It doesn’t begin to make sense.”

“Oh, you’re fairly up on them? Good, you can fill me in.”

“I’ve met them before, yes.” His tone was dismissive. “You’ll fit in quite well with sections of them. Suit, tie, polished shoes, some of them will go for that.”

“Yeah?” Bodie was surprised.

“Lots of normal people involved too. Scientists. Ex-services. Teachers. *Lots* of teachers. Lot of armed forces types, believe it or not. Not just your ‘I did National Service for a year, youth of today don’t know what they’re missing’ type, but regular army, RAF, all sorts.”

“Great. I’ll take the normal ones then, and you can have the rest.”

Doyle looked as though he was about to snap back, then paused, and laughed. “Right. Chuck us over one of those files. Let’s get started.”

~ ~ ~

They decided to keep to their own names, Doyle more dubiously than Bodie, but were told to move to non-CI5 accommodation. Cowley approved the rent on a single flat. They moved in over the course of a weekend.

“You’re sure about the backstories?”

Bodie stopped for breath and to check with Doyle as he carried the record player in. He’d had to leave the music centre back home, but since Doyle had won the argument about likely musical tastes for their parts, he didn’t feel it was a great sacrifice. The small living room was hardly a sound connoisseur’s delight, and he could see them both arguing over the guitar. He resolved to make sure that the radio in the mini-kitchen attached to the living room was tuned to something more palatable, however comfortable the sofa in the living room might be. Radio reception was appalling in the second bedroom, but since he had already decided that it was for show, he wasn’t too concerned. Admittedly, he hadn’t mentioned this to Doyle yet, but Bodie was confident that he could persuade him they should make the most of the opportunity. Doyle’s reply broke into his thoughts.

“Absolutely. I told you, ex-servicemen are ten a penny in CND. Perhaps drop the merc work, mind.”

Bodie had already decided to do that. “So ex-army is all right, but ex-policeman isn’t?”

“Definitely not. The whole movement’s convinced that the police and security services are hand in glove on smear jobs.”

“Are they wrong?”

Doyle grinned. “Probably not, no. That’s why I’ll just be a driver. Odd jobs. This and that. Know where to get things cheap for the cause.”

“Driver and odd jobs, that’s our lives anyway. Still, be nice to do it without being shot at.”

Doyle scoffed at him. “You’ll get bored.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

~ ~ ~

“I’m bored.”

“That didn’t take long.”

“Three weeks!”

“Still not long. And I told you.”

“Yeah, you did. Sod. You’re enjoying this,” Bodie added with a note of accusation. It didn’t help that Doyle was taking every opportunity to eye him up, while he, still folding pieces of paper into creases, couldn’t look up to reciprocate.

Doyle detached himself from the squashy chair he had been lying over and sauntered over to where Bodie was sprawled on the living room sofa.

“You. Are supposed. To be folding leaflets.” His gaze dropped onto the boxes of paper back from the printers and currently serving as a second table for supporting mugs of tea, and then returned to Bodie. “The cause is relying on you.”

“It’s a very boring cause.”

Doyle grinned. “I did warn you.” He waded astride Bodie’s legs and seated himself. “Tell you what. You finish your leaflets, and I’ll stay here and... encourage you.” He leaned in, and nipped Bodie’s neck gently.

Bodie caught his breath. “Ray...”

“What?” Doyle’s voice was muffled, his breath warm and damp. Bodie knew his eyes would be half-closed in satisfaction. “What’s the matter?” Doyle’s lips were moving, lapping around his neck as his hands began to find their way down Bodie’s back.

“Ray...”

“What?” Exasperation took over. “C’mon, Bodie. Been waiting all day.”

“I’ve got another two boxes, Ray.” Despite his words, Bodie could feel himself responding. The paper dropped from his hands, which crept towards the cheek of Doyle’s arse. He groaned. “For tonight. And you’re not helping me go any faster.” His fingers reached their target. Doyle shifted himself onto Bodie’s hands obligingly, his arms still draped loosely over Bodie’s shoulders.

“Coming, I was thinking of, not going.”

With a supreme effort, Bodie lifted Doyle’s arms away. The sacrifices he made for queen and country. “You’re a tease. Either that, or your timing is bloody awful. It’s the liaison meeting tonight. Here. Get off me, angelfish. Make me a mug of tea. Not that fair trade sawdust, either.”

“Bored of me already,” Doyle lamented, and sauntered out to boil the kettle.

He returned bearing mugs of tea and a biscuit tin filled with cakes. “Present from Sue.”

“How sweet.” Bodie tasted one dubiously and then disposed of the rest in two bites. “Mmm. Okay, fair trading lesbian vegan she may be – or do I mean a vegan lesbian? But she can cook. Pass me another?” He reached out.

Doyle regarded Bodie, an amused smile twisting his lips. “You not going to say ‘What a waste’ or something?”

Bodie felt obscurely hurt. “What? About Sue? No. I think she’s...” He shrugged. “She’s all right. Okay, I could do without the lectures about Freudian symbolism and cars. And God help us all if she knew about the guns. But she’s all right. Straightforward. What you see is what you get. And her file with CID, that was such a load of crap, it was actually an entertaining read.”

Sue was one of several activists they had met over the past few weeks who had a file somewhere in the system. Hers listed altercations with the police, resisting arrest, and a series of public order offences ranging from petty to ludicrous. Bodie had no objection to two pretty girls kissing in the street, and Sue’s earnest account one late night of almost being run over by a Master of Foxhounds when she had attempted to spray foul-smelling but harmless Citronella near the start of a fox hunt had struck him as more credible than the official police report about a five foot nothing pacifist attacking the MFH with acid.

Doyle continued to gaze at Bodie. “I thought you’d be at home with all the old soldiers, and instead you’re Sue’s agony aunt. You never cease to surprise me.”

“Well, I do the old soldiers, too. You’re just jealous because you haven’t got a badge. Not like mine.” Bodie brandished his ‘Ex-Servicemen Against the Bomb’ badge at Doyle. “I bet you’ve lost yours again.”

During a chilly day on a CND stall, Bodie had sorted through the distinctive badges – ‘Miners Against the Bomb’, ‘Teachers Against the Bomb’, ‘Tories Against the Bomb’ – until he found one for Doyle, and pinned it on him in pride. Under the benevolent gaze of Thomas, their intellectual anarchist in his seventies, Doyle had been unable to object, but the ‘Well-Meaning Guardian Readers Against the Bomb’ badge had disappeared as soon as Doyle had found opportunity. Bodie had promptly taken it as his cause to bring home every possible badge that might suit Doyle’s cover, and Doyle had found himself labelled variously as a Vegetarian against the Bomb, a Cat Lover Against the Bomb, and a Musician Against The Bomb. He had drawn the line the day that he had found a sticker on his jacket that said, so Bodie had informed him, ‘Nuclear power? No thanks’. In Finnish.

Doyle sighed, and reached over to his leather jacket. Among the biker and band badges, ‘Well-meaning Guardian Readers Against the Bomb’ had returned to nestle next to ‘Free Nelson Mandela’ and an expression of solidarity with the printers’ unions.

“Very good,” Bodie approved.

“And there’s a Guardian in the kitchen, just in case.”

“You think of everything.”

“Someone has to. Even if it’s a wild goose chase.”

Bodie straightened. “What’s your problem, Ray? Ever since we got this, you’ve been like a bear with a sore head.”

Doyle shrugged.

Bodie persevered. “Is it the cause? Ah, come on. It may be an honourable cause –” he saw Doyle look up sharply “– but if someone’s using it as a cats paw, it’s got to be investigated. Can’t have nuclear waste all over the trains. British Rail pork pies are bad enough as it is. We don’t want them glowing green and achieving consciousness one night.”

“Honourable cause? This? Honourable, maybe, but twenty-five years, and it hasn’t got very far, has

it? People have devoted their lives to this, and for what?"

"Never heard you so grumpy. What's the matter? Is it the nut cutlets?"

Doyle looked unwillingly amused. "Nah. Just... I dunno. We're not getting anywhere fast, and we need to. And this is a mass movement. Come on, Bodie. While you were doing whatever you were up to with the Regiment, the anti-nuclear movement went mainstream. It's not like the Aldermaston marches in the fifties. You saw the files. There were a quarter of a million in Hyde Park not so long ago." He paused. "Quarter of a million. The Labour Party's just put unilateral disarmament on its manifesto. All very respectable now. We're looking for a needle in a haystack." He rubbed his nose. "Possibly not even in the right field, either. There's a sizeable portion of this lot who are only anti-nuclear weapons; they're okay with the nuclear power industry. We might not even be looking at the right group."

Bodie swallowed a second cake. "Got to start somewhere. And we're doing all right here. Already established that it's not anyone in the main membership, haven't we? The rank-and-filers." He frowned. "Did Cowley ever hear back from MI5? What about the Met? You heard back from your old mates?"

Doyle shook his head. "Weren't many to begin with. Let's assume we won't. How are you doing on your lot?"

Bodie thought about the people he had met who shared his 'Ex-Servicemen Against the Bomb' badge. "So far? They've got the skills and the organisational ability but not the inclination. Lot of bad feeling about the A-bomb tests. Last thing they'd want is more people exposed to radiation. And they're..." He paused, unsure how to explain. "They're like us. CI5. War's war. That's us and them. But Hiroshima, Nagasaki... That's civilians. Like people in the high street. They don't want that. Not here, not there, not anywhere."

"That can't be universal."

"In the services? God, no. Anyone who was in Burma when they dropped the bomb, no. That probably saved their life. They're all for that nuke. And they say so." He paused, curious. "Is that where the Cow was, you think? What did you say, that time? He talked about being in a war? The story about the POWs? Got to be Burma, and the Japs, surely?"

Doyle glanced up. "Yeah, I got the impression it was Burma. South-east Asia, definitely. And yeah, your ultimate pragmatist, the Cow, I reckon."

Absent-mindedly, he removed the cakes from Bodie's reach. Bodie ignored Doyle as he continued.

"Right. Can't imagine him wanting to give it up. Anyway. Anyone who thinks like that, they won't be joining the anti-nuclear movement, will they? The ones we're looking at are the ones who are against the bomb. Nice old boys, some of them."

Doyle was looking at him with an indecipherable look. Almost... sympathy? Bodie felt nettled. "What?"

Doyle shrugged. "Nothing. How are those leaflets coming?"

Bodie recognised the change in Doyle's mood, and returned to his boxes.

~ ~ ~

"How did the leaflets come on, then?" The final arrival for the liaison committee meeting had followed Bodie into the kitchen, avoiding the others as they debated some point Bodie was sure wasn't on the agenda for the evening and which he had no interest in. In the circumstances he was happy to put the kettle on again.

"All done, yeah. Fancy a cuppa?"

"Is it fair trade?" John looked hopeful.

Bodie nodded earnestly. "Ray wouldn't have the other sort in the house."

"Good lad. Are all the others here?"

Bodie nodded. "You're the last. Well done – you avoided the impromptu discussion about affiliating to the regional area group."

John looked amused. "Thought that might come up. Been around long enough to remember the arguments before we disaffiliated. Let the new generation do it all again."

"Wasn't the new generation," Bodie informed him through a mouthful of cake. "Well, some of it was. Isobel and Bodger. If that's his name? Paul. Bodger. Whatever. But Thomas is here. He ran rings round them." He picked up the tray. "Shall we?"

In the living room, four people crowded around a map on a table and a series of phone numbers on paper. Conversation was animated. As Bodie arrived with John, Doyle darted him a conspiratorial smile. In a room full of chatter, it was for him alone. Bodie felt warmed by it, and then exposed – could everyone see what was in Doyle's look at him? They didn't seem to have looked up, but all the same, it could have been a close thing. The discussion continued, tea, biscuits

and cake consumed absently. Thomas and John had their diaries out, comparing dates with Doyle, when Doyle broke off mid-conversation.

“Okay, so you want me on Tuesday to Thursday? Bodie! How do you fancy a few nights away? Cruise Watch,” he explained. “At RAF Molesworth. Cambridgeshire. Camp outside the base, wait for the missile convoy to set off, trail it, find out where it’s going, back in time for breakfast.”

“Er – weren’t you supposed to be delivering my leaflets this week? You fold them, I’ll deliver them, that’s what you said.”

“Ah damn. I forgot all about it.” Doyle looked mournful, his eyes sparkling. “I’ll make it up to you, yeah?” His voice was full of taunting promise.

His words fell into a pause in the general conversation. A couple of heads looked up, and the others followed. Bodie cringed internally.

“Aye aye?” queried Bodger, alert for once.

Isobel dug him in the ribs. “Paul! Ignore him,” she told Doyle. “Between the university and the dope, he’s not fit for company.”

Doyle shrugged, unconcerned. “You tell him, love.”

Bodie winced.

“I am not ‘your love’,” Isobel reminded Doyle icily.

“I know, lo—. Er. I know.”

“More tea?” interjected Bodie quickly. “Ray. Give me a hand here.”

As soon as Doyle was in the kitchen, Bodie glared at him. “What are you doing?” He couldn’t afford to let his voice rise above a hissing whisper. “They’ll all be guessing things about us if we’re...” he gestured. “...if you keep that up.”

“What? Oh, leave it out, Bodie. They won’t care. Do you see any of them giving a shit about Sue? Tom’s an anarchist, Isobel’s a feminist, Bodger’s a twat – what does Isobel see in him?” He paused, diverted.

Bodie avoided the sideline. “Does what he’s told perhaps? Never mind them, this is about us! Our cover. Our assignment. We can’t end up being labelled as... that.” He didn’t even want to put a name to it. “We’ll be ostracised by the people we’re trying to penetrate. What about John? Quaker, remember?”

“Oh, Bodie.” Doyle laughed. “Quakers are the last people to worry about. They won’t care.”

“They’re fundamentalist Christians!”

“Hardly. Most of the Christians are very dubious about them. Have you never come across them?”

Bodie shook his head.

“Well, I’ve known a few. If they think something is very wrong, they’ll want to do something about it.”

“You’re just proving my point!”

“No. John’s here because he thinks nuclear weapons are immoral. He fuffs about fair trade coffee and sugar because he thinks that’s moral. He volunteers with ex-offenders, and he deals with some very unpleasant people.”

“So he’ll just think we’re unpleasant.”

“Stop it, Bodie. No. Look. They’re all about sitting in silence until someone stands up and says something. And then they all mull it over and sit around in silence some more. And then they get up and, I dunno, start boycotting arms traders or something. Peacefully. That’s very important to them.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And another thing.” Doyle grinned. “They don’t lie. Not if they can possibly avoid it. Very refreshing, that can be.”

Bodie had his doubts about anyone refraining from lying, but continued to press on the main point. “What’s that got to do with us, though? And...” He paused, shrugging uncomfortably.

Doyle followed his thought. “All part of the same thing. Something of God in everyone. Even us. They’ll reckon God knows what he’s doing with us, and if I work being bent out with God, I’m square with them.”

“You are daft.”

“Look, Bodie, John really won’t care about us.” Doyle looked amused.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. “ Doyle paused, and then came over to grip Bodie’s shoulders. Bodie automatically glanced towards the door. It was open, but there was no-one there. Doyle tightened his grip. “It’s *okay*. Look, it finally sank in, mate. This is undercover. And it’s not like being a gambler or a reporter or a punter at the greyhounds and trying not to attract the attention of the police. This isn’t the establishment. They’re the opposite. Look at who we’ve got in there at the moment. Being known as bent would work to our advantage.” His eyes held Bodie’s, confident and confiding.

Bodie looked back, waiting him out.

“Okay, well. Maybe not with everyone,” Doyle conceded. “Maybe not the mainstream types who show up with pushchairs and balloons to the big marches. But that’s not who we’re looking at, is it? We’re looking for someone in the thick of it. Someone in the activist end. And among them, a couple of poofs –” he ignored Bodie’s wince – “is just another pair of bodies. Look, Bodie, it just puts us outside society ourselves, like them. It’s far less important than the fact that we can drive anything and have PSV licences for minibuses and we can read a map properly and know how to use a compass and carry boxes of leaflets.”

“And what if it gets back to Cowley?”

Doyle shrugged. “What if it does? We tell him it was our cover, and it worked well. And, obviously, too well, if he thinks there could really be anything in it. You can tell him he should have sprung for two flats if he was worried about our image.”

Bodie considered. Always good at undercover, it had apparently taken Doyle no more than forty-eight hours to become an expert on the movement they were investigating. How? How much of that was prior knowledge? Was it from his years on the beat? He hadn’t realised Limehouse policing brought him into such regular contact with the anti-nuclear crowd. And if he was so casually authoritative, why was he so grumpy about this whole thing? Bodie would have to find out. But for now...

“So, if I sit up close to you and steal a kiss along with your biscuits...”

“No-one will give a shit, no. Not that they’ll notice anything different. You steal them anyway. Well. Biscuits.”

Bodie capitulated. And then grinned. “Finally, an undercover I can enjoy.”

Doyle cuffed him. “Fool. Get back in there with the tea.”

Bodie returned to find that in their absence they had been put down for a number of jobs, and, that done, the meeting was breaking up. John handed Doyle a sheaf of paper and went into a huddle with him, while Bodie discovered that he had been delegated to drive Bodger and Isobel to a planning camp at the weekend. “You know that private car use is inefficient and contributes to lead poisoning?” he objected mildly. “Can’t you plan your direct action somewhere with public transport?”

“Not this one,” pronounced Isobel. “We need somewhere... quiet.” She looked meaningfully at

Bodger. Bodger looked puzzled and then his face cleared. “Oh. That one.”

“Yes,” Isobel agreed. “That one.”

Thomas paused from putting his coat on. “Oh dear. What are you two up to now? You will be careful, won’t you?”

“Oh, we will,” assured Isobel. “Definitely.”

Doyle was looking between the three of them curiously. Before he could decide to get involved – and miss bloody leafleting day, thought Bodie resentfully – Bodie stepped forward. “Okay. What time do you need to be there?”

“Eight am,” admitted Isobel. “Pick us up from my flat, will you?”

Bodie managed not to flinch when Doyle flung an arm around him in a more overtly teasing way than normal as he showed Isobel to the door. “I’ll be there before you are,” Bodie assured Isobel.

~ ~ ~

“I’ll look forward to hearing all about it,” was Doyle’s only comment as they left the mugs to drain. “Rather you than me. But, in the meantime, since you’re up so early, perhaps we should have an early night?”

Bodie looked at him.

Doyle sauntered towards him and laid his arms on Bodie’s shoulders. “Since we were so rudely interrupted earlier?”

“That was you,” Bodie pointed out, indignant. “Flaunting yourself and then taking yourself off. And then all that hinting with the others here. You’re a tease.” Secure now that the flat was empty again, he brought his hands up around Doyle’s sides, working his hands up under the t-shirt. He flicked a finger at Doyle and felt him tense. “Time to pay up, I reckon. Come on.”

Together, they headed towards the bedroom, where they pulled clothes off and fell onto the bed. The novelty of being somewhere with almost official sanction still had a powerful effect on Bodie. He worked his way down Doyle’s body, hands and mouth, pressing, pushing, taking. Doyle arched his neck and back, and pushed back. Bodie pushed further, a finger snaking round Doyle, reaching for him. Finally, he had Doyle where he wanted him.

After several minutes had passed, Doyle pulled away. “Hang on.”

Bodie gritted his teeth. Doyle *was* being a tease. “Ray...”

"I'm not running away, Casanova." Doyle peeled himself away from Bodie with every sign of reluctance and pushed himself off the bed. He moved to the curtains and tugged them more tightly together. "Might be okay in front of others in the group, but no point in taking chances in front of the neighbours." He returned, kneeling back down onto the bed. "Now then. Where were we?"

The next hour more than made up for the teasing he'd suffered throughout the day.

~ ~ ~

Doyle lay flat out, limbs splayed carelessly. Bodie finished dressing and looked down on him.

"Where are you?" Doyle groped around the covers. "Ugh. All cold."

Bodie grinned heartlessly. "Wakey wakey. Morning! Hands off cocks, onto socks!" He picked up his rucksack and swung it onto his shoulder. "Off to this mysterious camp of Isobel's. See you tonight." He pulled the sheet back further, laughed at Doyle's curses, and headed out.

Rather to Bodie's surprise, Isobel and Bodger were on time and alert. Bundled up in heavy layers, they directed him to a rural location some way out of London.

"This?" queried Bodie incredulously. "What the hell is this?" They were looking at a rocky cliff face, its surface largely obscured by buddleia, young sycamore, and creeping flowers.

"Old quarry," supplied Isobel. "Tunnels, pot-holing, climbing."

"Building a bunker for when they drop the bomb, are you?"

Isobel slanted a glance at him. "You're not as far off as you think. It does involve bunkers, yes. We're practising climbing and pot-holing. We've got a plan."

"Are you now? I climb," Bodie offered off-handedly as he tucked away the location in his memory. "Need a hand?"

"Might do. Come and meet the gang."

"Great. Looking forward to finding out what's going on."

~ ~ ~

"It's freezing in here!" Bodie had been looking forward to getting back to the flat and relaxing after an intriguing day, but had not expected it to be so cold on his return. Nevertheless, he removed

his shoes and most of his clothes. "What's going on?"

Doyle's voice answered from the kitchen. "Had some of the lads round here to use the phone. They're convinced their phone's being bugged by MI5. Which it probably is. So they asked to borrow ours. Which definitely is – by us. Ironic, eh? And the reason I'm so sure they're not up to anything. Also, it's Saturday. Cheap rate. So they've been ringing all their mates long distance." He gestured at a pile of five and tenpence pieces by the phone as he came into the passage. "Doubt that's covered it, but they left us some dope as well. Seemed to think that would do. And then they produced some more for themselves, and things got a bit..." he flapped his hand before his face as he emerged into view "...smoky. Couldn't see to open the window at one stage. So I'm trying to get some air in. We really don't need busting by the cops. How did it go?" He paused to stare. "Bodie, what in the name of God have you been up to?"

Bodie had had an interesting day, and said so. "Getting somewhere, I think. This is obviously the right direction. That Bodger, he's a natural at climbing. All arms and legs, and he can bend into the smallest holes."

"Climbing? Holes? Have you been pot-holing?" Doyle stalked forward to the heap of clothes. "Oh my god, you have. Or you've been rolling in the mud for fun. What are they doing? Hang on." He ducked into the bedroom and produced a towel, a shirt, and a pair of trousers. "Catch."

"Ta." Bodie wrapped the towel around himself and headed for the bathroom. "You'll love this. The vast majority of them are there because they want to climb buildings on the US air bases and hang banners off them. But one or two of them are there training to climb and pot-hole because they think they're going to go clambering around the Underground looking for the secret government bunkers. A bunch of them have been down already. They've got a very pretty list of locations."

"Idiots." Doyle was terse. "Pity we can't just give them the map. Bound to be at HQ."

Bodie grinned. "Cowley's probably got the keys and the phone numbers, as well. We got any hot water?" He turned the taps on, filling the room with steam. Doyle, he noted with satisfaction, leaned back against the wall and watched from narrowed eyes.

"So. What's the story?"

The bath was full, and he stepped in gratefully and slipped down to cover as much of his body as he could. "The story? This is Bodger's friends,

mostly. He's a lot more alert than I'd have given him credit for – better be careful of that one."

Doyle nodded his head. "Noted."

"There were about forty of us there over the course of the day. Lots are student age or thereabouts. Postgrads. Postdocs. Lecturers at the local FE college. As I say, vast majority of them are just expecting to climb up in the air. But there were some older guys who know how to deal with tunnels. And a couple of instructors I didn't get much of a chance to talk to – we were split into groups – but the one I met definitely knew his stuff. Does cave rescue. You got a pen? I've got a list of names and descriptions for you."

Doyle fished a pen – and notebook - out of his back pocket. Bodie watched this procedure with interest. How did anything fit there?

"Okay. Shoot."

"Right. My new mate in cave rescue is Dave Wilberforce. Nice guy, offered to take me climbing. Turns out he's done Ben Nevis too. We thought about going in the summer."

"Bodie!" Doyle sounded exasperated. "Will you keep your mind on the job?"

"I am!" Bodie was injured. "I am making important contacts here. Anyway. Another of the instructors was female. Ailsa Jenkins. We can get her details off Isobel – they were all girls together, that group. Bodger's college friends: there was another Paul, astronomy and space science. There's an Andrea Perrazzoli – male, not female – and an Erik Bohrmann. Both here on study visas. Perrazzoli's in nuclear physics, Bohrmann's doing international politics. A group from Birkbeck – say we don't have to go there, Ray, I'm getting bored of nuclear-free campuses...." He inserted a plaintive note into his voice and was gratified to see Doyle grin. "The organisers were a bit cagey about names. One was Bob Suggins, I think – they called him Suggers mostly. What's the matter?"

"Suggers? Bob? Seriously?"

"Yeah. Ring a bell?"

"A big clanging one. That can't be right. Where's that list from the Met?" Doyle disappeared from the room. Bodie amused himself by creating water fountains with his hands until Doyle returned.

"He's not on the list."

"List?"

"Yeah, the Met came through with a list of officers who had contacts or knowledge in the peace scene. If that's Suggers, he's Met. Through and

through. Well, he was. And there's no way he's in this through politics or conviction. He was always first up when the force wanted some extra bodies to police the marches. Definitely up for a good kicking. Always thought he'd end up in the SPG, something like that."

"What, the ones who bashed that anti-fascist guy to...?"

"To death, that's right." Doyle refused to be diverted onto questions of police aggression. "Okay, I'll check that one out. Any more?"

Bodie thought and added a few more. "And then one last one, Ray. And you'll want to know about this. In fact..." he whooshed up to sit straight, water streaming off him. "In fact, I want to know about this too. Couple from Birmingham. Terry and Catherine Morris. Isobel introduced us. Got talking. Isobel mentioned your name, made some comment about your hair –"

Doyle looked exasperated. "Her boyfriend is a wannabe punk who can't keep his Mohican up. And she comments on my hair?"

Bodie carried on regardless. "–and they asked, "Doyle? Ray Doyle? From Derby? And asked me a whole pile of questions. Had you lived in Birmingham as a teenager?" Bodie looked at him. Doyle was poised, unmoving. "Good job I knew the answer to that one, isn't it? After our little adventure there with your 'one good copper'? Did you do trail biking? Did you ever get any more tropical fish? And so on and so on. They said how nice it was to hear about you again, Ray. Apparently you... lost contact? They said they'd like to meet you again some time. So, Ray. Terry and Cath. Who are they?"

"Oh, bloody, fucking, hell." Doyle banged the wall with his fist – Bodie winced – and stalked out of the bathroom. Bodie could hear him clashing things about in the kitchen and the slam of the window shut. After a few minutes, Bodie rose from the bath, pulled his towel around himself, picked up his clothes, and went to find Doyle.

Doyle was leaning against the kitchen cupboards, arms folded, and his face glowering. The kettle was switched on, but Doyle had obviously got the whisky from the cupboard, as two glasses were on the surface, one recently emptied.

Bodie was content to wait it out.

Doyle glared mutinously.

Bodie waited some more.

The kettle clicked off.

Doyle glared at the kettle, too.

Bodie rolled his eyes and made two cups of tea. As an afterthought, he retrieved the whisky and slopped some into each glass. "Right. Take your pick. The cup that cheers but not inebriates. Or something warmer. I could do with that myself," he went on. "It's still freezing in here and I'm not losing all the benefit of that bath."

Eventually Doyle stirred. "Yeah. All right."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Don't worry. The op's not in danger. We're not blown. Well, not yet, anyway. Don't think they've got any clue what I did later, so they won't know about CI5. So that's fine."

"Ah." Things were falling into place. "Are we getting anywhere near why you've been so irritable about this whole op? So grumpy?"

"I am not irritable!" Doyle flared up. Bodie just looked at him. Doyle shifted. "Yeah. Well."

Bodie crowded forward, to trap Doyle in place, one arm either side of him and anchoring him to the counter.

"Get off, Bodie, you're soaking me!" Bodie didn't move. Eventually Doyle slumped and Bodie decided to release him. He stepped back.

"Let's go through, yeah?" Doyle picked up his tea and moved into the living room. Bodie followed, shrugging himself into his clothes before picking up the conversation. Doyle was standing, not sitting. At least he wasn't pacing. Bodie left him space, remaining a few metres from him.

"So. Your knowledge of the peace movement is not from policing the anarchists in Limehouse Nuclear-Free Zone. Or not all. Come on. Spill."

Doyle looked irked. "See, this nuclear-free zone rubbish is just typical! What possible change in policy comes from half the county councils in England announcing they're nuclear-free? It's about as effective as banning animal circuses from council land. This Cruise Watch thing, I'll bet every road we go down will be on some nuclear-free council. What's the point? And..."

"Ray," Bodie intervened. "Back to the point."

Doyle paused, face twisted into a scowl. "Oh yeah. All right." He paced a bit. "See, it's a bit embarrassing. Dunno where to start."

"How about when to start?"

"Eh?"

"When."

"Always. Ever since I was a little kid." He came to a halt, staring out of the window. "My parents were old-fashioned socialists: Dad came back from the war swearing 'never again'; my mum marched for wages for housework, public access to private land, equal rights for... well, everything... and the pair of them joined CND as soon as it was formed. Before, almost. They were on the first Aldermaston march. Way back in 1958." He scowled. "So was I. I was ten."

Bodie laughed in sympathy, imagining a young child, adrift in a mass march of thousands, wondering when he would be home for the holidays his schoolfellows were enjoying.

"It's not funny, Bodie. Oh, I'm not knocking them – well, I dunno, I suppose I am."

"You haven't yet," Bodie assured him.

"...but where all the other kids at school went to Cubs and Scouts, or the Youth Club, I was in the bloody Woodcraft Folk."

"The who?"

"Woodcraft Folk. Sort of like Scouts, but all about peace and brotherhood across the world. Shades of anti-establishment, left-wing, environmental, all that. It probably wasn't that bad, but I wanted to be a Scout like my mates. Instead I was in this, with the kids of the sort of people my parents knew. It was the same with everything. We were always slightly different. I remember my mates did semaphore in the Scouts. Well, you know the first two semaphore signs I ever learnt? Long before they did that?"

Bodie shook his head. Doyle held his arms out and down, and then vertically up and down.

"N and D?" Bodie was baffled.

"Yeah. N and D. Look at this bloody badge of yours." He thrust his jacket towards Bodie. Bodie looked at the plethora of badges attached to it, baffled.

"And?"

"Put N and D on top of each other, and put a circle around them, and what do you get?"

Light dawned. "Oh. The CND logo. Nuclear disarmament. That's clever."

"Yeah, well, maybe. But it's just another thing. Another example. I got fed up of it. I mean, they're decent folks, my mam and dad. Worked all their lives, stood up for injustice when they saw it..."

“Sounds like more of them rubbed off on you than you thought.”

“Shut up, Bodie. They did all that, and good for them. I’m proud of them, I suppose.” He didn’t sound sure. “But some of the rest of them. Yeah, there’s the Quakers, and the church bazaars, and the ones who organise things and get things done. But there’s the rent-a-mob, and the anarchists – not the intellectuals like Tom – there were loads of them back in the day – the thugs and vandals, they’re just there for a good turn-up with the police... and the middle class wankers who think the police don’t know anything, but they’re first to dial 999 when they need us. Argh.” He ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

“So... you joined the police as an act of rebellion?” Bodie remembered a pensive Doyle once telling him he’d joined to get some discipline. He couldn’t hide his amusement.

Doyle looked at him for a long moment, then his mouth quirked in a grin. “Spouse I did, really.”

“What about the knife fight?”

“Knife fight? Oh, that. Yeah. Only had the knife on me because I broke the blade on my mum’s and had stolen her a new one. Needed to replace it before she found out, and this bastard kid didn’t want to let me by.”

Bodie shook his head. An odd childhood it might have been, but there was something about that ten year old’s parents, taking him along to march for the future they wanted for him, that appealed. There hadn’t even been Scout troops for him, let alone alternatives. Strange to think that diligent detective Doyle had been able to leave a life of non-conformity and idealism and distrust from society and to fit so neatly into the Met, the very body that policed those demonstrations so heavily.

And yet, Doyle hadn’t fitted, had he? He had been one of the many on the force to object to the few on the take, but he had been one of the very few to do something about it. In the process, he had lost everything. He had been lucky that Cowley was interested in those police officers willing to trust their own judgement over pressure from the job.

Bodie had left a childhood that was consistent only in its dreariness and tedium. He had never been sure as a child that his parents really even knew who he was, what he wanted, how he felt. It had been no trouble at all to forge his father’s signature on the papers to get him to sea, and it had been as a solitary teenager that Bodie had started to develop his own ideals and his own identity, buffeted on all sides by an ever-changing

world. Doyle at least had had a stable family and background to test himself against.

His tone was light as he responded.

“And to think I had to leave home to find some excitement.”

Doyle shrugged. “Maybe. I didn’t want that kind of excitement then. I wanted to be normal.”

“Mmm.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“What?”

“Not sure you’d ever be that normal, mate. But then, I wouldn’t want you to be that normal. Now then, what are we going to do about this Morris pair?”

“That’ll be Uncle Terry and Aunty Cath. Not my real relatives,” he explained. “But when we were in Birmingham, they were friends of my parents. I suppose,” he heaved a sigh, “I suppose I’d better make use of them, really. You seeing them again?”

“They said they’d be at the next Friends of the Earth meeting.”

“That’d fit. Okay, I’ll catch them then.” His shoulders relaxed.

“Good. Drink your tea. Before you spill it.”

Doyle looked recalcitrant, and then faintly shamefaced. Finally he took a mouthful, watching Bodie over the rim as he slurped. Theatrically, Bodie winced. He knew his cue.

~ ~ ~

Three nights later, Bodie blew on a couple of mugs of hot soup provided by a pair of local residents – wherever they might live in such a rural location – and wandered across the tarmac to Doyle, who was out of their vehicle and pacing around to keep warm. Even with only the glancing light of a couple of torches, he could pick him out, among the knot of other activists waiting for the signal to get into the cars and move. It had taken them less than two hours to get out of London in the night-time quiet, only to find themselves waiting around for at least that long. “How’s it going?”

“All right. Someone’s down at the base watching. There’s a peace camp there. Looks like they’re putting a convoy together, so we’ll be on later tonight.”

“And then we follow? And... what?”

“Try not to get shot.” Bodie could see Doyle’s silhouette tilt his head in amusement before carrying on. “While you were cosyng up to the Castles – thanks, by the way, I needed that –” he drained his soup with a slurp and thrust the mug back to Bodie “– I was getting my instructions. Did you know,” he lowered his voice and mimicked the horrified tones of Isobel, “Cruise convoys are guarded by men with guns. Police with guns! On the roads of Britain! In the middle of the night. They’re allowed to shoot! In England! This is what comes of allowing American air bases on British soil!”

Bodie could hear Doyle’s irritation and kept his voice amused and reassuring. “She wants them unarmed and in the Friday rush hour traffic jam on the A1, does she? I take it you left yours behind.”

Doyle patted his armpit.

“Ray...”

“What? It’s cold, I’ve got my jacket on, I’ll just make sure not to get arrested and searched. Not in front of this lot, at least. Anyway, are you telling me yours is back home under the bed?”

“Er... No.”

“Well, then. Anyway, yeah, they’ll leave the base, we’ll get in the way, hinder it, and if they get past, we’ll follow. Cause trouble. Track them to the next base or wherever they’re going for manoeuvres. Try not to get stopped by the police.”

“Plod here as well, are they?”

“Usually, apparently. If it looks like they’re heading long distance or something, I’ve got a list of names to ring when we find a phone box, and whereabouts they live, and we wake them up and they’ll be waiting on the likely roads, to jump around and get in the way generally.”

“Very organised. And the point of all this is...?”

“Don’t start, Bodie.” Doyle’s voice was sour. “I’m just the driver.” His tone lightened. “Piss me off and I’ll leave you at the phone box.”

Bodie grinned happily. “Want some more soup?” He crossed the road to where a battered Fiat 500 was parked. “That’s good, that, Mrs Castle. Thanks. Any chance of a refill?”

“You’re in luck, Mr Bodie.” She poured soup into the mugs.

“Just Bodie.”

“You’re in luck, just Bodie, then.” She smiled, her formality falling away. “I haven’t seen you here before, dear.”

“Only recently involved. You do this a lot, do you? Feed the troops before the chase?”

“Quite a bit, dear, yes. I know all my regular boys and girls.” She cast a glance vaguely around the road, taking in the scatter of cars and a variety of passengers, some snoozing, others stretching their legs. The road was narrow with no markings on it, and overhung by trees which screened it off from the fields to the sides. On such a minor road, the half-dozen parked cars seemed crowded, with every chance of blocking any large vehicles that tried to find their way down it onto an A-road, no matter how neatly and responsibly the cars were tucked into the verges. Bodie followed her look, gazing around as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Focussing on one particular figure, his eyes narrowed. “Mmm,” he agreed absently. “Well, thanks, Mrs C. Better take this back to the driver.”

Sipping the soup out of both mugs, which he justified on the grounds that it would otherwise only spill over and burn his fingers, he headed back purposefully to the car.

“Ray. Don’t look too soon but over there. Leaning against the white Mini-van. Cigarette. That’s Suggers. The climber at the planning camp the other week. Recognise him?”

Doyle arched casually round. “Well, well. Yeah. That’s him.” He pulled his lower lip. “Reckon it’s worth saying hello?”

“Don’t see why not. Does he know what you’re up to now?”

“Unlikely. No sign of movement at the base?”

“Not so far.”

“Okay.”

Doyle pushed off from the van giving every sign of a man in need of a tree to aim at, and Bodie watched him pace swiftly beyond the other man to the hedgerow bordering the road. He slipped through it. On his emergence a few minutes later, he meandered back at a more leisurely pace until he caught the other’s eye. Bodie strained his ears.

“Bob?”

“Yeah?” Suggers was looking blank, and then relaxed slightly. “Jesus, if it isn’t... Doyle? Ray Doyle? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Driving,” Doyle answered succinctly. “Fancy meeting you in a place like this, eh? Would never

have pegged you for this. Bit of a change of heart, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well. Could say the same about you."

Bodie watched Doyle as he stopped to face Suggers, who looked at him cautiously.

"You still in the job, Doyle?"

"Nah, moved on from that. Years ago. It's not what it was."

"No, I imagine not."

"You not in it any more either? Do this lot know you were? Don't want to drop you in it."

"You're a mate, Ray. Probably best not to mention it, no, but it won't matter." His tone was idle, curious. "What about you? What you up to now?"

Bodie had seen that question coming, and forestalled any reply, stepping forward and calling over the road. "Ray! Ray, I need the keys."

Doyle's head swung round. "What you done now?"

"Boot's locked. Left the map in it, didn't I?" Bodie tried to sound plaintive, knowing perfectly well that it was on the front seat, folded in with their more standard AA map. The map he was talking about had been distributed by the campaigners and was marked with a number of elements not on the AA map: US air force bases, runways, and roadside phone boxes in particular.

Doyle sighed. "Can't take you anywhere. Here you go. See you, Bob." He sauntered over to Bodie, rummaging in the pocket of his flying jacket and opening the boot wide. Bodie watched Suggers from beyond Doyle. In the gloom all he could see was the posture of the man, who was apparently gazing in their direction. Doyle's lowered voice broke into his thoughts.

"You can't really have left it in here. And you in the SAS and all."

"Oh, we don't have maps in the SAS," Bodie assured him. "Stars and tree bark, that's us."

He knew Doyle was grinning. The warmth kept him going through the rest of the long wait, until finally a shout went up as the gates opened and the convoy of lorries emerged to its secret destination. Police cars escorted it, mysteriously getting in the way as the Cruise Watch participants tried to keep up with the convoy, until Doyle, cursing, demanded Bodie forget about the stars and tree bark and find him a short cut with the map.

They careered off into the network of B roads, spending the rest of the night finding short cuts to the next phone boxes and calling – and waking – a bewildering variety of people to join the effort, while keeping the convoy of lorries and their police escorts in sight. Bodie proved able to read maps even as the car bounced through the dark and the torchlight shone on every surface except the page the maps were folded to, and Doyle followed his directions unhesitatingly as they rattled through quiet lanes, took roundabouts at appalling speed, and chased the convoy in the direction of the motorway. Bodie thoroughly enjoyed it all.

~ ~ ~

It was almost six before they made it back to their flat, Bodie rubbing his hands in amusement as he went over the events of the night, and Doyle grinning ruefully at Bodie's wakefulness and good mood. They were silent as they trooped up the stairs to their door, but Bodie picked up the thread as soon as they were in.

"I reckon nearly losing them in Bedfordshire was the best bit – good save that was!" As the door closed behind them, he planted a huge kiss on Doyle, aiming for his lips but catching his cheek as much.

"Get off, Bodie! Give me a minute, at least!"

"I enjoyed that, Ray. Can we do it again?"

"What, last night?" Doyle had headed straight to the kettle and was dropping teabags into mugs. "You don't fool me. You just want a chance to drive. Cross between James Hunt and James Bond, that's you."

Bodie grinned. "Good fun to do that with nobody shooting at us."

"Or us shooting at them. True. Nice to come back with the windscreen still in place and the tyres all intact. Mind you, got to remember." Doyle slopped water and milk into the mugs, then lifted a finger and repeated his imitation of the previous night. This time, his irritation had given way to humour. "Guns. Men with guns. On the streets of Britain!"

"And in the beds in Britain too." Bodie came up behind Doyle, who had dropped his flying jacket over a chair and whose holster was now visible. He slid his fingers beneath it. "Need disarming, you do." He felt Doyle tense beneath him, and paused. Doyle took advantage of the pause to gulp a mouthful of tea, put the mug down abruptly, and turn beneath Bodie. His gaze was amused.

"Oh yeah? This a mutual disarmament, is it? Or you hoping for unilateral?"

“Well...” Bodie offered. “I suppose we can negotiate.” He started to walk Doyle back to the bedroom.

Doyle grinned. “I know your idea of negotiation. The sort that leaves you with the advantage. You don’t fool me. That’s my kind too.” He reached for Bodie’s shoulders, and started to alter their joint course. “We’ll see who comes out on top.”

~ ~ ~

After a scant hour of sleep – following a rather more active hour beforehand – Bodie heard Doyle sigh and head off to the bathroom and then kitchen. He left enough time for Doyle to have started making breakfast, and then followed.

“Morning.”

Doyle focussed on him. “Morning.” He was interrupted by a wide yawn. “God. Supposed to call in this morning, aren’t we? Do me a favour?” He poured a second cup from the teapot, passed it over to Bodie, and nodded towards the hall.

Bodie nodded. He grinned as Doyle dolefully discovered the teapot was unable to provide him with a third cup, and went to call in.

“Betty! Gooood morning! How are you? Good, good. Listen Betty, have we got those names back from the computer? We have? Great.” He pulled the telephone pad towards him. “Go on.”

Betty’s voice came back reeling off details.

“Morning, 3.7. Yes, I have. Are you ready? Dave Wilberforce: tree surgeon, a string of arrests for trespass, one charge of resisting arrest, yes, he’s a volunteer with Berkshire Cave Rescue. Andrea Perrazzoli, nothing on him, but his sister is a member of a lot of related groups, Animal Aid, Compassion in World Farming, Friends of the Earth, and so on. Your Susan Mackenzie has shown up on the magistrates’ records for the week, incidentally – another public order offence...”

“Has she? Oh, dearie me. What’s she done now? Never mind, I’ll find out about that later. Go on.”

Betty continued down the list, Bodie jotting notes down. “And I’m still waiting for – oh, wait a minute, Bodie...” Betty’s voice sounded flustered.

Bodie waited. There was a rattling noise and then Cowley came down the line.

“Is that Doyle? Bodie? You said you’d encountered a Robert Suggins? Ex-Met?”

“Bodie here. Yes, sir. Outdoor activities sort of stuff for young activists...”

“Aye. Well. He’s not just ex-Met. It took a while to come back with the information – there’s a block on his name on the computer – but he’s MI5.”

Bodie groaned. MI5 meant trouble. Always.

Cowley’s voice carried on. “And he’s not on the lists that either MI5 or the Met provided us of officers with leads into the peace network. So whatever he’s doing, be careful. We need to find out about it. Don’t approach him for the moment, though, not until I have a clearer idea of...”

“Er – sorry, sir. Already made contact. Couldn’t be helped. Last night. Would have looked odd if Doyle hadn’t said something to him.”

“Tch!” Cowley’s exasperation was audible. “Ah, well. The best-laid plans. All right. I’ll expect your report shortly.”

“Yes, sir.” He put the receiver down. “Any tea on the go?”

Doyle, returning from the kitchen, nodded down at the teapot he was carrying. “Here you go. What’s the news?”

Bodie relayed the detail, Doyle’s eyes flickering as he absorbed the news. There was a particularly irked scowl as Doyle received the information that his parents’ friends from Birmingham were on the ‘well-meaning but ineffectual’ list – “I could have told you that twenty years ago,” he observed sourly, “and they haven’t changed a bit. “They were exactly the same when I saw them at the FOE meeting the other night,” – and a glare of incredulity at the news that Suggins was a member of MI5.

“Oh, you have to be kidding. Hell. Has he looked us up too?”

“Might have run my name through before now, but he won’t have had time to do you. He only saw you last night. Wonder what he’s up to.”

“MI5 playing its own little games again, I’d say.”

“Mmm. Following the same whisper as us, though, or something completely different?”

“Good question. And on that note, are we any further forward?”

“I’m not. I’ve been to every possible group meeting in allied groups. Peace groups, environmental groups, Friends of the Earth, Amnesty International, Peace Pledge Union, Compassion in World Farming... Closest I’ve got is the animal rights brigade and some of the environmentalists – they’re definitely up for a barney, some of that lot. World’s over-populated, need to lose a few, the odd

human death here or there is morally acceptable in the cause of saving mink, that sort of thing.”

“Mink?” Bodie was puzzled. “We don’t have mink in England.”

“Yeah, I didn’t know that either. But we do. Fur farms. They go and free the mink. Need big bloody gloves, though. Apparently they bite. But anyway. I could see some of them spreading radioactive slime about. I just can’t see why.” Doyle chewed his lip.

Bodie rose to rummage in the biscuit tin.

“Hey. No more cakes?” He was surprised to find himself disappointed.

Doyle glanced up and his expression lightened. “I don’t think our vegan baking friend can keep up with your stomach. Did you say she’s been up in front of the magistrates again? You can always express your sympathy and ask for more cakes. Or the recipe. Yeah. Make her some cakes. We’ll be seeing her today anyway. She’ll be on the stall this afternoon. Thinking of which...” he rummaged through a battered calendar. “It’s your turn to leaflet today.”

Bodie groaned. And then brightened as he considered which badge he could bring home for Doyle from the stall.

~ ~ ~

“Whose turn is it next week?”

“Well, since Bodie has demonstrated that even a man can learn to cook...” Isobel couldn’t help herself, Bodie decided. She just had to make comments about the sexes at every opportunity. Even when Bodie had just baked his new speciality for the group meetings yet again.

“Always been able to, ducky,” he camped automatically, this time earning a glare from Sue, who did not approve of stereotyping. “Sorry. Go on. I can see what’s coming. But this will be the fourth week in a row that I’ve provided the supplies. Man cannot run on cake alone.”

“You can,” noted Doyle, helpfully. “Ignore him, we’ll be happy to host. Leave your notes and stuff here if you want. And thanks for the recipe, Sue, you’ll make a vegan of him yet.”

Sue looked happy. “Nice to have someone making me cake. Without an ulterior motive, or anything. I mean,” she gestured between Doyle and Bodie. “I know he’s just being...”

“I know,” Doyle reassured her. Bodie still wasn’t sure what he thought of being rendered harmless by virtue of his involvement with Doyle. It wasn’t

as though he had lost his eye for pretty girls, after all. Despite that, he gave her his best non-threatening smile. She carried on, happily.

“And, I meant to say, thanks for helping with the fine last month.”

“No problem,” Bodie told her. “Can’t have you locked up for sitting down in the middle of the road.”

“It was totally non-violent,” Sue emphasised. “According to the group constitution. Non-violent direct action. Against the patriarchal war machine. There was no reason for them to get their truncheons out.”

Sue seemed oblivious to any double entendre. Bodie manfully resisted the temptation to point it out to her. “Yeah, well, that’s why you don’t want me on these things. Someone gets their truncheon out, I’ll be hitting back.”

“Also, you’re not a woman,” Doyle reminded Bodie helpfully. “Lesbians Against the Bomb is one of the few badges you can’t legitimately wear.” Discovering that his badges now proclaimed his opposition to the seal cull, Doyle had recently regained the initiative, sneaking a ‘For fox sake, ban hunting’ badge onto Bodie’s leather jacket. Expecting retaliation, he was checking his own daily for new arrivals.

“You do have quite a few badges, don’t you, Bodie?” John was sorting his papers, and then placed them in a tidy pile. “You two really seem to have thrown yourselves into the thick of things. I mean... it can only have been three months, and yet here you are, baking cakes for the liaison committee and getting ready to marshal on the demo next week.”

Bodie grinned, all external unconcern. “Yeah, well, whatever you do, do it... well, I reckon. Throw yourself in. Only way.”

John looked at him again. “That must be it, yes. We’ll be seeing you at Meeting for Worship at this rate.”

Bodie threw his hands up. “Not me, sorry. Not a turn the other cheek type, I’m afraid. Hit back, I do. Like I said.”

“More importantly, what are the chances of Bodie sitting in total silence for an hour?” asked Doyle, coming up behind him. Bodie aimed for him by reflex, and Doyle grabbed his hand and arm. He leaned his chin on Bodie’s shoulder. Bodie automatically relaxed for him, comfortable now with Doyle’s passes at him in public – well, in private, at least, although as far as Bodie was

concerned, 'in front of anyone else at all' would always be public. "You..."

"I think you're proving your own point there, mate." Doyle straightened. "Right, John, are you leaving those with us?"

"I am. Safest place, I think. Don't you?"

~ ~ ~

"I think John's wondering about us." Doyle was sombre as they packed things away after the meeting.

"Well, I would."

"You wonder about everyone."

"Yeah, well. That's the job."

"Who are you wondering about now, then?"

"Apart from you? Bodger. Where was he tonight? Have he and Isobel split up? She's been even more sullen than usual. Has he got reports to write? Can you even write reports in maths? Just imagine, 'I can report that 723 doubled successfully turned into 1456'."

"Forty-six."

"Eh?"

"Fourteen hundred and forty-six. Not fifty-six."

"Oh." Bodie thought. "Yeah."

Doyle rolled his eyes. "And to think I trusted you to map-read our way through the police escort last month."

"That's a different sort of numbers. Anyway. Bodger. What's up with him? I wanted to get hold of him, ask about those climbing camps. Put myself forward and find out what's going on with that."

"Yeah. Want me to come along?"

"You want to?"

"Dangling off ropes halfway down a quarry face pretending I'm halfway down the shaft to a nuclear bunker? God, yes. Can't think of anything better." He paused and eyed Bodie. "Haven't done as much climbing as you, but I've done a bit. Only reason I can see not to is not to put the wind up Suggins. I assume he's still involved."

"Yeah, me too. Better find out for sure. Okay, we'll go looking for Bodger. Any idea where to start? Have you seen him recently?"

~ ~ ~

"Get that, will you?" Bodie was removing his latest baking experiment from the oven and inspecting it critically – if he was going to have to bake cakes, he was damn well going to bake good ones – when the doorbell rang. He listened with half an ear, and then became alert.

"Have you seen Paul, Ray?"

"Isobel? What's up? Come in. You don't want people staring at you."

Bodie heard a 'What?' of surprise from Doyle, before muffled sobbing and awkward 'There, theres'. Moving to the corridor, he saw a startled Doyle patting Isobel's hair, her head pressed into Doyle's chest and her shoulders shuddering. Doyle looked over her to Bodie in consternation.

Bodie pantomimed bafflement, and indicated the living room. As Doyle drew the sobbing woman towards a chair, he found a box of tissues and then escaped to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

When he returned, she had regained some of her composure and was blurting out her story.

"...and then, then, he said, he couldn't tell me. It was a cell, and he couldn't tell me. And... and... I don't know what they're going to do. But –" she paused, and hiccupped slightly "– I'm worried. I'm really worried. Paul's so passionate about things."

Bodger, passionate? Bodie considered that. He couldn't see it. But maybe he was.

"And, and, all the ropes and helmets have gone. We were storing them for the club. The climbing society at university. I've been complaining about it for ages." She managed a tearful smile before her mouth crumpled again. "But I can't help wondering. Is he about to do something silly?"

"Hey. Hey." Doyle gave her a slight shake. "He loves you. Yes?" Isobel looked at him hopefully. "Yes?" She nodded. "So. It'll all be fine. Look. You had a row. He went for a walk. It's a man thing. We do that. We're..." Bodie could see Doyle steeling himself. "We're not so good with talking. Are we?"

"But you... you and Bodie, you're so..."

So what? Bodie was baffled. He rather suspected Doyle was too.

"Ah. Yeah. Well. Maybe. Maybe that's because..." Doyle shrugged.

Bodie winced. Playing the poof was all very well, but now he knew how Doyle felt about his campier public comments. Vulnerable, somehow. Bodie wasn't sure how he felt about Doyle suggesting

they had some sort of feminine touchy-feely side because of... because of that.

Doyle soothed her some more, and sent Bodie for one of his cakes. ("Don't tell Sue," admitted Isobel. "But she's right. It's nice when someone makes you cakes. Vegan or not.") She stayed for half an hour, first Doyle and then both of them cheering her with takes of outsmarting the Cambridgeshire police vans or the time a sympathetic passer-by had seen a drenched Sue leafleting on the high street, popped into a café and emerged to press into her hands a cup of Bovril. Sue had been distraught, but thanked him politely before passing the meat extract drink into Bodie's willing hands.

Having finally pushed Isobel back out of the flat, with instructions to ring that evening to let them know whether she had found him, made up with him ("Never mind about made out with him, though," he added firmly. "We don't need to know that"), and generally found out what was happening, Doyle leaned back against the door and shook his head.

"Agony aunt on top of everything else."

"You were wonderful, Ray. Just like Claire Rayner. Do you do pregnancy advice as well?"

Doyle pulled a face. "New career again. Might need to start if we don't get anywhere on this. We started off so well, looking back. And what have we got? Nothing! It's been three months. Okay, there are compensations..." Bodie grinned back at him, well aware of the compensations. But Doyle carried on. "But I miss my flat. I miss my Capri. I miss..."

"You miss getting to shoot things? Being shot at?"

"No! Well, yes," Doyle admitted. "Not being shot at, exactly. But... you know what I mean."

The trouble was, Bodie did know. They were getting bogged down. Watching Doyle deal with a distraught abandoned girlfriend was amusing, but wasn't getting them any further. Undercover freed them from a lot of routine and from unexpected summonses to Cowley's office, but at least an unexpected summons to the Cow often ended up in a complete change of direction, whether it was bodyguarding a visiting dignitary or hunting a grass through a series of squats. "I'll call in to HQ. See if there's any news their end."

~ ~ ~

There had been no news, beyond the confirmation that Bodger had returned, was apparently suitably penitent, and the climbing gear was still missing. The liaison committee met again, this time to

appoint marshals and organisers for the upcoming demonstration. Bodie was amused to see Doyle struggling not to offer suggestions that would demonstrate his long familiarity with Met policing techniques, while at the same time providing concrete assistance.

"If I'm planning a demo, I'm doing it properly," he told Bodie later. "I'm not having some Met arsehole stop me marching. Or dragging Thomas down a side street to beat him up out of sight. Did you know, the man's 76? You'd never believe it, would you? He remembers the Spanish Civil War."

"Should get him and Cowley together. They'd have lots to talk about."

"Yeah. They'd have been on the same side. Weird, that, eh?"

Bodie shrugged. "You were on the same side as the Met once."

"I still am." Doyle was stung.

"Are you?"

"Well... Not when it comes to beating up pensioners, no."

"Attaboy. Nightcap before bed? Big day tomorrow."

~ ~ ~

"Snifter to keep you warm?"

Amid the tumult of the crowd, the shouts, the klaxons, the chanting, and the occasional jeers from inconvenienced tourists unable to see Eros as the march surged around the monument in the centre of Piccadilly Circus, it was hard for Bodie to make himself heard as he kept pace with Doyle. It was interesting being one of the people stopping the crowd, for once. Normally he was the one in the Capri, swearing and finding a way around the centre of town. He smiled and waved breezily to one of the ranks of grim-faced policeman charged with preserving the integrity of London, before clapping his arm about Doyle's shoulder and passing a hip flask over to him.

"There you go. Last of the good stuff."

"You're a mate. Ta. How's it going down in your section?"

"Like clockwork. They're all marching in sync, half of them with their medals on. They don't need me. Thought I'd come and keep you warm."

"Bodie!"

“Keep you company, I mean.” He grinned. “Mind, we could go and find the Gays and Lesbians against the Bomb, and...”

“Get out of it, Bodie. Liaison committee, yes. At a public demo, no. They’ll be dragging us apart, kicking the shit out of us.”

Bodie could believe that.

“Hang on a minute, we don’t need to find them, they’re coming to us.” He tightened his grip around Doyle, wishing Doyle’s flying jacket wasn’t so thick, and indicated Sue, who was hurrying backwards along the coil of marchers. “Hey, Sue! How’s it going? Drink?” He retrieved the flask from Doyle and gestured towards her with it.

“Bodie!” Sue looked visibly relieved. “Ray! Hey, listen, big trouble. Big, big trouble. Can you peel off and meet me and Isobel back at the Wimpy where we met up this morning? As soon as possible. It’s urgent.”

“What, you lost the leaders for the die-in? I’m marshalling here...”

“No, the die-in’s going to be at Whitehall, we always change it on the day, so the police...” She shook herself. “You know that. No, much more urgent. We’ve been infiltrated.”

“Er, what?” He kept his eyes away from Doyle, knowing Doyle would be doing the same. All attention on her, instead.

“Infiltrated!” She had to shout over the noise. “Get down to the Wimpy. I’ve got to find Thomas and—”

Bodie shook his head. “Thomas said he was making his own way to Trafalgar Square. Said too much planning and organisation for a demo was contrary to his principles of anarchy.”

Sue let out a sobbing laugh. “He would. Right, see you as soon as I can make it. Just got to tell a couple of other people first, change some of the arrangements before they box us in.” She looked about her urgently. “Oh god, they don’t want us going down that way. They’re trying to divert us. Damn. Which way out?”

Doyle was looking around dubiously too. “Bodie, give us a leg-up?”

“What?”

“Now, Bodie.”

Bodie took the point and moved to one side, to let Doyle clamber up him and survey the crowd. He was down in seconds. He turned to Bodie.

“Yeah, I think we can get down Shaftesbury Avenue, cut left into Soho, and get round that way. Sue, aim for the Poets for Peace banner and then cut behind the yellow car.”

“Don’t get arrested,” added Bodie, “We can’t bail you out again, you’re breaking the bank.”

Sue laughed, and ducked up to peck him on the cheek, before vanishing into the crowd.

Bodie put his hand up to his cheek and then turned to Doyle, spreading his arms wide.

“I’m sorry, Ray. My heart has been stolen by another.”

“You daft bastard. Let’s get moving.”

They darted sideways and through the police line onto Shaftesbury Avenue, then left into Wardour Street. It was strangely populated by a mixture of tourists, shoppers, and marchers who had evidently just popped aside to do a bit of shopping, or to grab a coffee from one of Soho’s numerous coffee shops. They cut through Sheraton Street and emerged onto Oxford Street and into normal Saturday central London. Shoppers hurried, headscarves on or umbrellas up. There was no sign of demonstrations, marchers, or police lines. Bodie pulled up.

“Like another world, eh? They’ve got no idea.”

Doyle shook his head. “I know. All that planning. What a waste of effort. Now do you see, Bodie? Waste of time.” He paused. “You got your R/T with you? In case we need back-up?”

“No. Nor my ID. Got my...” he patted his armpit.

“Me too. So – what do you reckon’s going on? Not us, I presume?”

Bodie shrugged. “If it is, bluff it out, I reckon. Guns are because we’re not nice people, don’t ask us too many questions, but we’re serious about nuclear weapons. That should cover it.”

Doyle nodded. “Right. Let’s get over there.”

They darted through the tourists and traffic, neither of which seemed particularly perturbed by their race between them. It took them no more than five minutes to reach their destination.

“There it is,” Bodie caught Doyle’s arm.

Doyle nodded. “And there she is.” Before the window stood a small knot of people, most of whom Bodie recognised from the morning’s last-minute planning. Several were talking animatedly. Others, Isobel included, were pacing nervously.

“Doesn’t look like a lynch mob, does it?”

Doyle shook his head. “Even if it is, we can handle this lot. Oi!” He raised an arm and waved at Isobel as they hurried over the road.

“Oh, Ray!”

For a second time, Bodie watched Isobel fall into Doyle’s arms. What was this fatal attraction Doyle had for her? He couldn’t see it himself. Well, he could see what he saw in Doyle. Energy, focus, competence, comradeship, a body with strength to match his own, and danger held in check. The knowledge that they were a match for each other, physically and emotionally. He just couldn’t imagine what Isobel saw.

“Hey, hey.” Doyle lifted her away. “Come on, Isobel, what’s up?”

“It’s that climbing guy. Bob.”

Bodie saw Doyle stiffen, his hands on her shoulders. His voice became less reassuring, more urgent.

“Suggins? Yeah? What about him?”

“He’s got Paul and friends all ready for an expedition today – they’re supposed to be going in through the tunnels while the police are all focussed on the demo.”

“Tunnels? Where? Where?” he repeated, shaking her slightly. “What tunnels?”

“Waterloo somewhere. Well, no. Lambeth. I’ve got the address where they were meeting.” She produced a crumpled bit of paper. “They’ve got a way in through the maintenance tunnels, and they think they can map their way to another government shelter.”

“Jesus.” A shadow passed across Doyle’s face. “And...?”

“Well, Paul’s set off already. And I’m supposed to be keeping an eye on police movements around the march. You know, stop us getting corralled in.”

Doyle nodded, impatient. “And?”

“And that’s when I saw him. Bob. Suggers. Whatever his name is, the bastard. All matey and pally with a bunch of Special Branch.”

“Eh? How do you know they were Special Branch?”

She looked at him as if he was mad. “Everyone knows! Well, okay, not everyone. But enough of us know enough of them by sight. The old hands, at least. And when they’re all together, you can see they all know each other. And we’ve got

cameras too. They might be filming us, but we can photograph them. Have you never seen the picture library? I think Tanya’s got it at the moment.”

“No. Anyway, go on. So Bob Suggers is MI – no, Special Branch, you think?”

Bodie winced. *Careful, Doyle.*

“Special Branch, yes. Or an informer. Some kind of infiltrator, anyway. And he’s got Paul and friends doing something, and I’m *worried*, Ray.”

Doyle caught Bodie’s eyes, then turned back to Isobel. “Okay. Here’s what we’ll do. Bodie and I can climb, too. I take it you’re going to spread the word about Suggins?”

She nodded, mute.

“Good. Now, don’t come following us, and *don’t* come trying to find Bodger. Er. Paul. We’ll get over there, and we’ll do what we can. Pass the word around about Suggins, and make sure the march doesn’t descend into chaos. Eh?”

Isobel stood straighter. “I went on those camps. I can climb as well as anyone else there.”

“Oh, god help us. I’m sure you can, Isobel, but we need you here. And we’ve done a lot more climbing than a couple of weekends away. Stay here!”

Doyle held his hand out. She surrendered the paper. He glanced at it, stared in disbelief – “Oh, for crying out loud, that’s right next door to the official residence of... “ – and then turned to Bodie. “All right, Spiderman, let’s get going. Where’s the nearest tube?”

“Feels all wrong steaming to the rescue on the bloody tube,” Bodie muttered.

“Snob. Anyway, we haven’t got the car, and the buses’ll be snarled up for hours yet. Just be thankful we didn’t have to change lines.” Doyle was looking about him at the Waterloo mainline concourse. “God, I hate this bloody station. Where’s out? Out towards Lambeth, I mean.”

By luck or judgement they found themselves at the right exit and tumbling in the direction of Lambeth. Bodie was still reeling at the idea of Bodger and his friends trying to find nuclear bunkers for the benefit of Lambeth Palace. Half running, half walking, they took only minutes to reach Archbishop’s Park, where they tried to slow to an amble appropriate to a Saturday afternoon walk.

They paced warily through.

“So,” Bodie muttered quietly, “They’re looking for nuclear bunkers next to Lambeth Palace? For the

Archbishop of Canterbury? Exactly how mad are they?"

"Well, we do have nuclear bunkers, you know."

"Yeah, but there?"

"Where'd you put them instead, then?"

It seemed a promising topic of debate, but they were cut short when Doyle nudged Bodie.

"There they are, look. By the bandstand."

They were, six of them looking ridiculously out of place whilst they tried to blend in. Bodie winced. "Not exactly inconspicuous, are they? All belted up and carrying hard hats?"

"Perhaps they're going to claim they're trimming the branches. That's a bloody big tree."

"It doesn't take six men to prune a tree. Does it? I mean, I can see Dave there. He can do it on his own, I'll bet." Bodie strained to distinguish Bodger and to recognise the others.

"Oh, look." Doyle had been looking elsewhere. He hit Bodie lightly in the chest. "Suggers is arriving." He frowned. "Wonder what's in that box? Is it..." He trailed off as he struggled to see. When he spoke again, the jovial tone had slipped away and his voice was sharp. "Bodie, is that box chained to his wrist?"

Bodie focussed on the new arrival. "Looks horribly like it. I don't like the smell of this."

"Bomb, you reckon?"

"Well, something sensitive. What else do you chain to your wrists? If not money or the Cabinet minutes?" Suggins was walking purposefully towards the half-dozen men.

"I dunno. What would MI5 be doing with bombs? Has the Archbishop been denouncing them from the pulpit? I can't see it, myself." Doyle bit his lip. "I was going to suggest we wait to find out what's going on, but I'm not sure now."

Bodie didn't like it either. "Hang about, they're moving. Can we get closer?"

"Better had."

They turned and walked, meandering towards the bandstand. The group were moving out of sight, to the shade behind a squat brick building used in the summer for selling ice cream and snacks. The area was cut off from the main aspect of the park.

Doyle paused, Bodie behind him. "Both sides?"

"Yeah." Bodie watched Doyle run round to the other side of the hut and start creeping along the wall. Bodie followed suit so that they were converging on the far side from opposite ends. At the corner, he stopped and glanced cautiously round, grateful for the gloom of the trees.

There was a manhole on the grass. Two of the group were levering it up. Bodie flicked a glance along the wall. Presumably Doyle was at the other corner, but he could see no sign of him. He looked back at the group. One of them had dropped down into the hole, and another was following on his heels. He could distinguish Bodger now, pulling his long hair into a pony tail and up under his helmet.

Bodger dropped down, and – was that Dave? Yes, it was, the tree surgeon – Dave passed a rucksack down before coiling ropes around himself. Should Bodie intervene? There was only Suggins left now, and that sodding box on his arm. What the hell was in it? No, he couldn't risk leaving it any longer. He tensed to move, and then was startled by a shout.

"That's enough, Suggins! Stand still! Hands wide apart."

Doyle had beaten him to it. He still couldn't see Doyle, who must be the third of a triangle, with the hut wall obscuring two points from each other. He knew he mirrored Doyle's actions, though, drawing his own gun.

Suggins, startled, ignored Doyle's demand, instead grabbing for his gun with his free arm and shooting. The box caused him to overbalance slightly. Bodie saw his lips form a curse. Good. He'd missed.

Bodie moved into view before Suggins could fire again. "Two of us, Suggins, so put it down. *Down*," he snapped as Suggins didn't look inclined to follow.

A startled head emerged from the manhole. "Bob? What was that noi – shit!" Panic registered on Dave's face. "Bob? That's a gun!"

Suggins glared down. "Get out of the way, Dave, don't get hurt. Stay away."

"Same to you, Suggers." Doyle came into view, his gun clearly visible and also aimed at Suggins.

"Jesus!" Dave ducked back down into the shaft.

Suggins looked from one to the other of them, evidently considering his possibilities.

"Don't. Even. Think. About it." Doyle was caustic. "Gun down, this direction. Gently. That's better."

Suggins had stooped to throw it to the side.

“Right. Move away from it. Bodie.”

Bodie was ahead of Doyle’s instruction, collecting the weapon – a Walter PPK, he noted – and automatically slipping the magazine out. He tucked it away in his jacket pocket while Doyle kept his gun on Suggins.

“Now then, Suggers. Let’s leave these lads to their mole impressions, and we’ll go and have a little talk. And you can give me the key to that box while you’re at it. Bodie, there was a phone box back there. Wanna call for a car and some cuffs?”

~ ~ ~

“CI5.” Suggins sounded disgusted. “Bloody fly boys. Interrupting everything. Yet again.”

“MI5.” Bodie imitated his tone. “Bloody spy boys. Infiltrating everything – or trying to. Yet again.”

“That’s enough, Bodie.” Cowley swept through the door to the interrogation room in the bowels of CI5. “You and Doyle can get back to your job. Though how you’re going to pick the pieces up from this, I don’t know.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” offered Bodie airily. “Purging the ranks of MI5 infiltration ought to get us quite a long way back into good graces. Can’t we stay? We won’t be missed for a while yet.”

Cowley considered. “Ach, you may as well.”

Seated at a bare table in the empty room, Suggins looked between them curiously.

“Never you mind,” Bodie told him curtly. He strode round the table so that he and Doyle were either side of Suggins. “Come on, then. What’s in the box? Do we need nose filters? Sandbags?”

Suggins made no reply. The box, the wrist lock undone, sat on the table between them.

Doyle shrugged. “Come on, then. Let’s see what’s so special.” He unlocked it and opened it.

There was no gust of air, no explosion. The box fell open. Two cylindrical canisters rolled gently within it.

Cowley reached over and poked at them with a pencil.

“And what are these?”

“Careful, sir,” offered Doyle. “I think I might know.” He looked at Suggins. “You do a lot of these little trips underground, do you? With the anti-nukes crowd? Care to tell us which bits you’ve been mapping?”

Suggins sneered.

Doyle shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll ring a friend and find out. In the meantime, sir, just to save time...” he looked at Cowley. “Do you happen to have an exact list of where the... you know... was found in the underground system?”

Bodie watched Suggins flick eyes between the two. His forehead glistened.

“Aye, Doyle, I think you’ve got it.” You had to hand it to the old bugger. He could be fast. “Bodie, get Philips down here. With a Geiger counter.”

Bodie nodded and crossed to the telephone in the corner.

“Yes, all right,” snapped Suggins. “It’s hot. Well. Warm.”

“Is it now? Well, I think we’ll all be thankful to know exactly how warm that is, Mr Suggins. Should we be calling for lead blankets, I wonder? And I wonder how MI5 comes to be carting it around central London in the first place. But I think we can now guess to what purpose. You’ve been waiting until the peace group, this band of... disaffiliates, whatever they are. You’ve been waiting until their subterranean travels coincide with public avenues into and out of the system. And at points where it will eventually be found, you’ve been depositing radioactive... articles. You’ve been making sure that it’s only in places where they have been mapping the tunnels. I expect eventually you’d have stolen that map and leaked it, if the campaigners themselves didn’t publicise it. And then Special Branch, or perhaps even a surprised MI5, would put two and two together, and arrest half the anti-nuclear movement figureheads. And leave the rest wondering how they had failed to notice such goings on and how much else they had missed. Sowing fear and uncertainty.”

Cowley scowled.

“Now I don’t agree with this movement, Mr Suggins. I happen to think we need that deterrent. But they are peace campaigners. They’re not violent, not the bulk of them. Yes, they have their anarchists and their thugs spoiling for a fight. But CND and their friends have been thoroughly penetrated over the last thirty years. What did MI5 think they needed to do this for?”

Suggins remained silent.

Cowley shook his head. “It’s a question I’ll be asking Willis in a few days. I think I’ll wait until he gets around to asking whether anyone’s seen his agent, though.”

There was a knock on the door. "Phillips, sir." came a muffled voice.

"Ah, Mr Phillips. Come in. I have an object for you. Have a quick look at it, and then you can take the case away and devise a suitable method of storage for it. Until someone comes asking for it back."

Phillips approached, intrigued. He ran a small rectangular object over the case and its contents. "Fairly standard case and canister, sir," he said. "Traces of radioactivity. Shouldn't be a problem, not if it's handled by someone who knows what they're doing. The idea is to keep it inside the canisters, after all. I suppose whoever it was didn't know what he was doing. Do you actually want me to open it here? I really ought to take it upstairs."

"Well, Mr Suggins?" Cowley looked at him. "What would you advise?"

Suggins shook his head stubbornly.

Cowley smiled. "Ah well. My curiosity will keep. Enjoy your stay here, Mr Suggins. Bodie. Doyle. With me."

Bodie watched as Phillips fairly trotted back up the corridor with his new property. "That man's entirely too excited about what's in there."

"Mmm." Doyle nodded dubiously. They both looked at Cowley, who was animated, clearly keen to get to work with his new information.

"So. Obviously MI5 are attempting to destabilise the anti-nuclear movement, by suggesting they're getting into places they shouldn't, and have access to materials they shouldn't. Good work, the pair of you. I think you can finish now. No need to go back and re-establish your cover. I'll expect your report shortly. And you can explain how you got onto Suggins. Clear the flat out by the end of the weekend, and be back here on Monday."

"Monday?" Bodie objected out of habit. "It's Saturday now. We've been three months undercover, sir."

"And the work's been piling up without you to do it. Wednesday, then, but no later. Now. Out." He motioned them to precede him.

Bodie opened his mouth to expostulate, but paused as Doyle dug him in the ribs before pulling him into a fast lope.

"You'll never win. Let's get back to the flat. Or –" he glanced at his watch "–the demo. Speakers will have finished, but the bands will still be playing."

Bodie shook his head. "Somehow, I don't think we're going to have time to hear the bands. We'd better clear out before half the people we know

hear we were waving guns around in Lambeth. Let's pick up a van from the garage. Take the lot in one go."

Doyle nodded. "Good thinking."

~ ~ ~

They were about to make their third trip carrying things from the flat down to the van before there was a knock on the door.

"Bugger," muttered Doyle. He raised his voice. "It's open."

Bodie, in the kitchen, switched the kettle on. Might as well try for civility. He heard boots trooping down the corridor into the living room and popped his head out. Doyle was leaning against the wall, looking resigned. Filing into the room were familiar faces: Isobel. Sue. Thomas. John.

Doyle stayed in place. The four committee members stared at him in silence. Isobel looked uncertain; Sue mulish. Thomas had his head tilted to one side, examining Doyle.

"Where is it, then?" Sue's voice was thin and unhappy.

"Where's what?" Doyle wasn't playing. "What's the matter? No hellos? No congratulations on a successful march? No pooling of info on Special Branch informers?"

"Don't!"

"Don't what?" His voice was mocking.

"Paul says you had a gun," Isobel supplied. "You and Bodie. And Suggins. And you were going to shoot Suggins."

"I wasn't." Doyle sounded nettled now. "And I didn't. He was the one who shot at me. He's the one you should be worried about."

"But you had a gun, didn't you? Where is it?"

Moving softly, so that the others couldn't hear him but Doyle could see him, Bodie stole to the front door and shut it. For added certainty, he locked it. If anyone stole their cases from the car, he'd just have to take up compensation with Cowley. He returned to the room, making no attempt to be silent. They hadn't moved. Doyle still leaned against the wall. He nodded his head to Bodie.

"Cup of tea?" offered Bodie. "Cake? Kettle should just have boiled. And sit down, all of you. It's been a long day."

Apparently no-one wanted tea.

"Just tell us... why?" Sue's voice sounded distressed. "Who are you? Why have you got guns? We're a non-violent movement! You know that!"

"We weren't violent!" Doyle repeated. "For god's sake. Who's told you what?"

"Paul told us," said Isobel. "He said that they were going on that... reconnoitre... with Suggins. And then while they were down there, there was shooting. He said Dave looked up, and he could see Suggins with a gun, and you two as well. Two against one."

"We didn't shoot! That was him!"

"But you had a gun!"

"Yes, but I don't shoot first! It's only there to stop people shooting me!"

"Oh, Ray!" Sue sounded desolate. "But don't you see? That's exactly what we're fighting against! It's the same thing. Having nuclear weapons just in case? Claiming that it's in case someone else drops the bomb first?"

"It's not the same!" Doyle looked agitated now. Bodie couldn't resist the temptation to help.

"Of course it's not," he agreed. "Guns aren't radioactive."

"You're not helping, Bodie." Doyle's voice was taut, but Bodie could see the flash of amusement in his eyes.

"No. You're not." Sue wasn't so amused. "Who are you two, really? Are you more of the same? More police spies? No. You can't be. You're together. You can't be gay and in the police."

"I'm not gay," objected Bodie, as Doyle retorted, "We're not in the police."

"Well, not entirely gay," Bodie added, after some thought. Doyle just looked at him.

"And it is the same," Sue returned to the point. "Using violence to defeat violence. We don't even know what Suggins was doing. What was going on."

"Ah. Best not to, really," Bodie admitted.

"So who are you? Who was he?"

"Can't tell you the first. But we can tell you that you were right. Suggins was an infiltrator. And he was trying to set you up. You'd have got the blame for something unpleasant." Bodie shook his head. "I'm sorry. You need to look gift horses in the mouth more carefully. Fit young guys with useful skills... well."

"All of them?" Thomas asked shrewdly.

Bodie looked at him. "For what it's worth, we did as good a job for the campaign as we could. Quite enjoyed the Cruise chase. Thumbing my nose at the plods." Bodie didn't look at Doyle. "And the cake." He flashed a smile at Sue, who didn't look certain whether to laugh or cry. "But we'll be going now. Here." He crossed the room and rummaged in a box. "The committee meeting minutes and phone number lists. They might help you rebuild. We won't be needing them." He dumped a box file on the table.

He could feel Doyle's eyes on him. Deliberately he didn't look. "Sure no-one wants a cup of tea? No?"

There was little more to say. He unlocked the door and they filed out. John paused to collect the box file. Thomas hung back briefly. "You're a loss to the cause, you know."

"Yeah, we know." Doyle came forward, tiredly. "But we do our share. There are worse causes than ours. Or yours," he added awkwardly.

"Hmm. Well. Good luck." The elderly anarchist smiled briefly. "Next time, across the barricades?"

"Hope not. See you around." Doyle accompanied Thomas down the steps to the street. "Locked the car," he told Bodie on his return. "But bloody hell, what am I saying? 'See you around'? I bloody well hope not. I can't believe that! What a shower! We stop them being used as cats paws, we don't even fire a shot, and they still hate us! Being perverts, fine, but carry a gun, oh, no, we're as bad as the nuclear state? What is this?" He made as if to hit the wall.

Bodie caught him. "Hey. Stop it. And we're not perverts." He considered. "Well. Not really. You and your fetish with my elbows, that's a bit perverted."

Doyle looked at him balefully. "Well, you put them in all the wrong places."

"Do I? Want to show me where?" He leaned forward.

"Bodie!"

"Come on, Ray. Good memories, this flat has. Until this evening, anyway. Let's make some more."

Doyle glared at him.

"Ray. I'm sorry about how it ended, but how can you be surprised? You're the one who kept telling me all along that they didn't know when they were well off. Look. No-one's hurt. No-one got shot. We've got one over on Willis." Bodie considered. "You had more organic and bloody fair trade food"

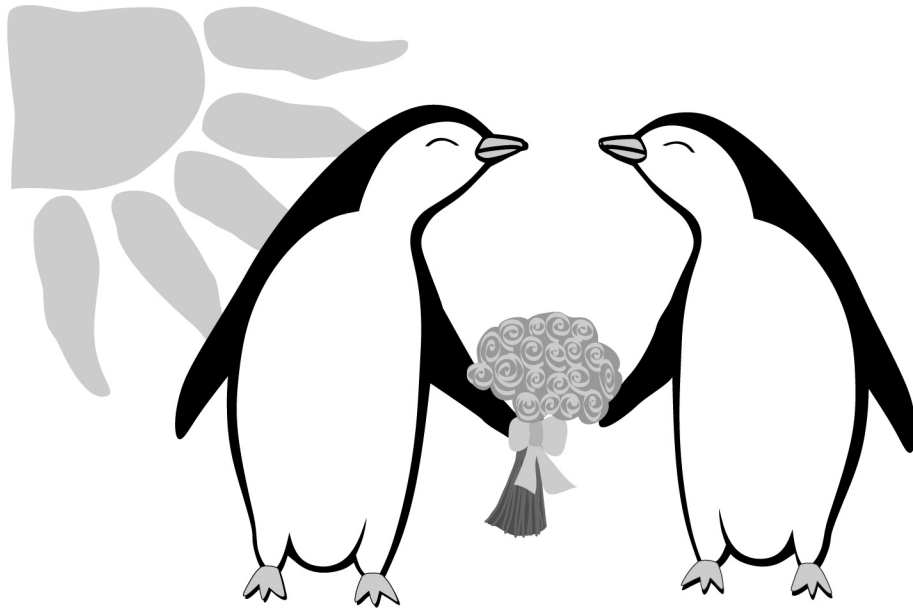
than I ever knew existed. And you made me eat it. I even made you cake. And, admit it, the Cruise Watch night was fun.”

“Yeah, all right. I’ll give you that.” Doyle stirred.

“So come on. Forget how it ended. Forget the packing. We deserve a celebration. Not a wake. We don’t actually have to move out today, you know.”

Doyle grumbled, and Doyle complained, but in the end, they left the packing for another night. And celebrated. After all, they had until Wednesday.





The Real Thing

by Sandy Herrold

with Charlotte C. Hill and Rachael Sabotini

Editor's Notes

Imagine Me and You was a sweet, 2005 romantic comedy about a woman who married her best friend, Hector, only to learn that best friends sometimes aren't the best choice in love. On her wedding day, Rachel met Luce, the florist who did the flowers for her wedding. Luce knew immediately. It took Rachel a few weeks, partly because Luce wasn't what Rachel had imagined for herself, and partly because Hector was such a good man.

Ten years later, when the story opens, Rachel is still figuring things out.

Like so many British films, this love story did more than one thing. It examined true love, sexual orientation, unrequited love, and loss; *and* it was a story Sandy hadn't finished. The challenge of doing it—and her—justice was daunting. We hope against hope that you see Sandy in the story, and hear her in the words.

The Real Thing

by Sandy Herrold

with Charlotte C. Hill and Rachael Sabotini

“Are we going to your cousin’s recital Thursday? Your mum said H would be there.”

Rachel took her hand off the faucet, wondering how Luce always knew she was about to turn the water on, even from another room. “Ugh.” After ten years, Luce still refused to call her Hetta. “H” might not be a name, but “Henrietta” belonged on the embroidered kerchief of someone’s great aunt, a kerchief stuffed with mothballs and hidden in a cedar trunk. Rachel thought “Hetta” was the best her sister could make of it, all things considered.

“Rachel!” Luce called. “The recital?”

Rachel called back, “I mean, I’d like to. Thea’s a sweetie, but a recital? And don’t you have... something... on Thursday?” She hated to admit that maybe she hadn’t been listening earlier.

Luce stepped into the bathroom and kissed her beneath her ear, because Rachel didn’t like mouth kisses before tooth brushing and Luce loved her that dearly. “I could probably be done with the Hogkins’ wedding early if you want to go. Or pull Edie in on it.” She glanced at her face in the mirror, and ran her fingers through her hair. “Who plans a wedding for a Thursday?”

Rachel smiled, at Luce’s unruly hair and the naturalness of her lover’s beauty, and at how very little she bothered over herself. “Well – then let’s. I’ll call mum and tell her.” She reached out and fluffed Luce’s hair, pulling it back a little from her face. Luce had a streak of white developing in the middle that Rachel both loved and feared. Loved because it was a sign of their time together; feared because it meant that they were pushing middle age.

Luce darted in again, kissing her forehead this time. “Let’s meet there, in case I’m running late, okay? See you tonight!”

~ ~ ~

Thea attended the same primary school H had, and Luce knew it well, though times had certainly

changed. She watched the way Rachel gazed with avarice across the array of goodies.

“I don’t know when recitals started to have buffet tables,” Rachel said. “I probably shouldn’t...”

Luce set her hands on Rachel’s trim waist and leaned in to whisper. “Are you kidding? After that last mangled Mendelssohn? We deserve champagne and truffles!”

Rachel smiled at her. “You don’t even like champagne.”

“That isn’t the point.” She grinned as Rachel grabbed one small sugar-covered biscuit and resolutely stepped away from the table.

“Oh my goodness, it’s Heck, there with his back to us.” Rachel attempted to discreetly point across the room with her sweet. “Wow, I haven’t seen him...”

“Since he left for Argentina in the spring,” Luce said, and shared a look with Rachel, whose face radiated smiling contrition. Funny how in a relationship something like “remembering dates” became one person’s job.

They headed over, saying ‘hi’ to friends and relations as they went.

“Heck!” Rachel reached way up and put her hands over Hector’s eyes.

“Rachel!” He turned, slipping her hands, and reached out for a hug. Luce smiled at them, trying not to think of what a beautiful couple they still made. Had she and Rachel never met, the pair might still be married, with two kids and a dog and Rachel’s mother the proud ruler of the whole brood.

They parted and Heck smiled his huge smile at her, as he always did. “Luce; you’re looking great.”

H stepped out from behind Heck. “You are, Luce,” she said. “You put us all to shame.”

“Hetta!” Rachel said happily. “Mum told me you’d be here, but I’d begun to doubt her.”

Henrietta looked fabulous, every inch of the near-uni graduate that she was. She was taller, and her hair a little darker, but she kept the same long bob she'd worn as a tween, and Luce still saw the picture in her head of Rachel ten years ago when they first met. At Rachel and Heck's wedding.

"Yes, Heck and I were supposed to keep an eye out for you two, but we got caught up in catching up."

Luce watched them smile at each other, and winced. So much like her sister.

"And now you have to catch us up," Rachel said. "What have you been doing?"

Luce lost track pretty quickly; H and Heck talked at the same time, adding comments to each other's stories like couples do – or maybe just close friends, she chided herself. They were both up, excited and happy, and she decided to be happy for them. "Wait, did you say you got a book?"

Heck looked shy and thrilled at the same time. "I got the contract last year, but I didn't want to say anything until I'd finished it. It's coming out in May!"

"It's his first travel book," Henrietta said. "First of many, I'm sure." H looked as proud as if she'd created him from whole cloth.

"Yes, yes, but have you heard that Hetta is graduating with distinction?" Again, they grinned at each other.

"My god, look at the two of you wunderkind. We definitely owe you both drinks." She checked and Rachel hinted 'more'. "Or dinner! You have to catch us up on everything."

H gave them both quick Creed-scented hugs, nearly spilling her drink down Rachel's back.

"Let me catch up on my sleep," Heck said. "I only left Buenos Aires on Monday."

Rachel's Aunt Tami stopped by then, ruining the reunion. "Oh, how good to see you all," Tami said. "I'm sure Thea's thrilled you could all come, especially with Tess busy."

Luce grabbed Rachel's glass, promised a refill, and wandered off. Tami wasn't her favorite of Rachel's relatives, and she knew she wasn't Tami's favorite lesbian destroyer of heterosexual wedded bliss. Even after ten years, some people couldn't let go. Once around a corner, she pulled out her phone and texted H. "Saturday night okay? How about Hillers at 8? Let Heck know." She finished her drink while she waited for H's okay, then sent: "Anything you want to tell me?"

Not to her surprise, all she got was a heart icon. Well, H was a sweetie, no doubt.

She looked idly for Thea, then harder when it was clear all of the kids in the recital had gathered to provide entertainment. Still with two drinks in her hand, she headed down the stairs, compelled by the tinny sounds of the secondary school version of *Just Dance*.

~ ~ ~

Saturday morning rolled round, and with it Rachel's day off and Luce's busiest day at the flower shop, preparing for church services and weddings, formal parties and funerals. Her mum and Edie opened the shop, though, giving Luce a glorious half-day with her partner that, in their early years, they had spent entirely in bed. Time changed all things, though; Luce had been up alone since dawn. She had showered, finished her second cup of tea, and was picking through the *Times* when Rachel walked down the stairs at eight.

Time didn't change things so very much; Luce admired the show through the slit in Rachel's robe. "It's the weekend – you want something fun for breakfast?" Luce asked.

"Nah, cereal's fine."

Luce frowned, too lazy to make pancakes for just herself, but she rounded the bar island and passed out tea and milk and cereal for Rachel, stealing a kiss as she passed by. "Ned says Tess is feeling punky; that's why she missed the recital. He thinks you should come over for a few."

The barstool's wooden legs scraped over the tile floor as Rachel settled herself. "My dad never said punky in his life."

"Don't underestimate your dad. He can still startle me sometimes." She changed her mind and started making pancakes after all. She mixed up batter and warmed up a burner, happy to cook without a deadline for once. It was remarkably nice for April, and the sun through the kitchen windows felt decadent. "So, you going over?" she asked as she stacked the first two pancakes on a plate.

"What?" Rachel was buried in her iPad, reading her blogs.

"To your mum's?" Rachel was already lost in her reading. "Rachel!"

"What!"

Luce put a stack of cakes on a plate in front of her. "Are you going to your Mom's today?"

"I told you, I didn't want pancakes! Or Mom's, either."

Luce took a deep breath. She knew Rachel turned from classic morning person during the week, to 9am space cadet on the weekend. But she seemed easily hacked off this week. "Hey, are you okay?"

Rachel just looked stubborn. "Of course I am." She finished the last spoonfuls of cereal in a hurry, and took two swallows of tea. "I'm cold; I'm off to dress."

In this mood, she'd just as soon Rachel did go over to her mom's for a while. "Good riddance," she whispered as she started cleaning up.

But she couldn't stay mad. Not long after she'd stuffed herself with pancakes, Rachel came down with a smile and a kiss that melted her. Rachel tasted of toothpaste and she smelled fresh, her own clean body under the scents of jasmine and lavender from the soap she loved. "I'm sorry, honey," Rachel said. "I think I can multitask, and then I get mad that I haven't heard you clearly."

Luce kissed her back and slid her hands past Rachel's waist, onto the curve of her ass to tug her body closer. When Rachel tensed, though, she gave up. Rachel was already dressed, and her mind was on what she planned to do next. Clearly, it wasn't a morning tryst. "It's okay," she said, forgiving more than the foul mood. "Give Tess and Ned my love, okay?"

Rachel grabbed her coat off the chair and gave her a hug. "I never said I was going there, you know. I could be going to the store, or the office, or to see my secret lover."

"Absolutely you could. And ask Tess if she's doing her big Easter do this year again, will you? The shop always has so much work for Easter; I need all the warning I can get."

"I don't know how my secret lover will know that, but I'll ask." She turned at the door to smile, and Luce watched her leave, wondering if maybe nothing was wrong at all.

Luce went to work early, promised her mother—again—that nothing was wrong. "Rachel's mom is sick," she said. "She went round to do her daughterly duty and save Ned an early execution."

The news made her mother laugh, good medicine for them both. "I'll never understand what Ned sees in that biddy."

"I do," Luce said. "Tessa..." Tessa had a great deal of Rachel in her. Too businesslike, too put upon by the world, Tessa nonetheless shone brightly, and if you looked past the bitch you saw the woman

who loved her family deeply. "She didn't take long to accept me," she said. "And you know she'd have married Heck herself, if she thought she could."

Her mother laughed again. Luce finished bookkeeping that would free up a bit more of her Sunday, and left the shop by six, in plenty of time to get home and changed for dinner with Henrietta and Heck.

~ ~ ~

They picked their way through the crowded bar, making excuses as they went. Luce finally saw Henrietta up ahead and pointed her out, only to see her bend over and kiss Heck. Luce stopped and looked back. Rachel's face was a picture. "Um." Luce glanced back. They were still kissing. So much for the chance it was a casual peck.

"Do you *see* that?" Rachel, stuck behind her in the narrow pathway, looked like she was ready to barrel through.

Luce was virtually certain Heck and Henrietta hadn't seen them. "Rachel, why don't we go outside for a second?"

"Outside? I—" she swallowed and looked around at the packed room. "Fine." She didn't stomp, but she did turn with almost martial swish.

They barely cleared the restaurant's glass doors when Rachel said, "Did you *see that*?"

"Honey, the whole bar saw that." Luce kept them moving out and onto the sidewalk.

"Where are you—" Rachel took an angry breath. "He's almost 15 years older than her." Rachel pulled her hair back from her face, crossly pulling it into order.

"And she's two months from graduating uni. She can date anyone she pleases."

"Grrr," Rachel murmured angrily.

Luce swallowed hard on a smile. Rachel never appreciated people making light of her feelings, even when she showed them so adorably.

Rachel stared back at the restaurant doors, as if she could peer inside and through the throng of people to suss out Henrietta's intentions. "Maybe it's just a pash," she said.

"Absolutely." Rachel's face was still red. She looked furious. "Oh, sweetie. It'll be okay." Luce started to walk down the street, hoping Rachel would follow. "Let's give them a minute, okay?"

Rachel looked at her wristwatch, the clunky timepiece her father had given her after she and Hector had divorced. “We *are* early.”

“Yes.”

“There’s a bar up the street,” Rachel said. “Ten minutes, a quick drink. Then we’ll come back and pretend that never happened.”

Luce nodded. Rachel was wonderful at pretending. After she and Hector had divorced, they had somehow remained friends. But they’d been friends first, since primary school. They should never have taken it further than friendship, and Luce didn’t know how Hector managed it, remaining close with the person he had loved so deeply. She couldn’t have done it.

Luce led Rachel to a pub three blocks away, too fashionable for her tastes but it sold booze so it would do. She thought that once the shock wore off, Rachel would be happy for Heck. Over the years, Heck’s love life or lack thereof had been a topic of discussion on more than one occasion, and they both wanted him to find someone. The fact that it was his ex’s sister, well...at least it would keep him in the family.

Two minutes later, drinks in hand and cramped in an alcove away from the noisiest parts of the bar, she watched Rachel rage. “I don’t know what she’s thinking! I don’t know what *he’s* thinking!”

“It didn’t look like a lot of thinking was involved, in that kiss.”

Rachel glared. So many feelings made her brow furrow tightly. And that made Luce want to rub at those lines and smooth them away.

“She’s so young, Luce. Seriously, she’s so young. And he’s... not.”

Luce nodded. That was true enough. “But he’s a good man, Rachel. A very good man. You know that.”

Rachel nodded, bit her lip. “Yes.”

“Yes, and, they’ve known each other for years. Even if it doesn’t work out, I think they’ll be kind to each other.”

“As if that helps. I tried to be kind to Heck, and ripped his heart out.”

“You should be glad he’s finally ready for something serious.”

“I am,” she said.

Luce laughed out loud. “You’re not.” She tried not to let her voice sound accusing, but it was still a

problem for her—a bigger problem since the laws had changed and Rachel claimed she didn’t want to risk cocking up another marriage. Luce had wanted their wedding, wanted it so badly.

“I *am*,” Rachel repeated. She stared at her Cosmopolitan that she always ordered. She didn’t even like vodka, but she loved the way the drink looked in the glass. “I—it’s not that I don’t want him to be happy. I do. But Henrietta is my sister, Luce. She’s my *sister*. And, damn it, I want one of us to do it right!”

Do it right. Marry the prince? Grab the brass ring? Live that story whose seed Rachel’s mother had so firmly planted in her heart that the woman still collected pictures of porcelain dolls and lace dresses? Rachel may as well have thrown that drink in Luce’s face, the ice-water shock of the words landed so hard. Rachel kept staring at the stupid, *stupid* pink drink while Luce felt her heart pound, her blood start to boil.

When Rachel finally looked up, she must have realized, because she looked first startled, then afraid. “Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” she said in a rush.

Luce set her whiskey on the bar, hard enough that the heavy glass slid across polished wood and clattered against the wall. “You sure as hell did, Rachel. What the hell!”

They stood, staring at each other, panting, neither willing to break the impasse.

Rachel’s *silly* pink drink rippled, giving away the tremor in her hand. “I *didn’t!*”

“Then what *did* you mean? If she wants a good man, there aren’t many men better than Heck.”

“But he’s—”

“What?” Luce seethed. “What is he?”

People were staring, now. Luce wasn’t trying to project her voice but she must be anyway, because Rachel looked both frightened-pale and embarrassed-pink at the same time, and her doe eyes kept darting around to the nearby patrons. “We should talk about this later,” she said, prim and proper. Oh, so proper.

“Or not at all. You get this. And give my apologies to H.”

~ ~ ~

Rachel Stanton loved beautiful things. That wasn’t unnatural. There was nothing wrong with it. She was an extremely fortunate person, to have a beautiful family: a loving father she adored, a mother who might be controlling and tetchy but

who remained devoted to her husband and both of her children. Rachel had beautiful friendships, some almost as old as she was. And she had found the most beautiful love imaginable—the love of her life—in Luce Bell. She knew Luce loved her equally; that, too, was beautiful.

But knowledge did nothing to dull the pain of watching Luce stare at her with damp eyes filled with hurt. Knowledge didn't dull the agony of watching the woman she loved walk away with long stiff strides that bespoke of her anger, and put at risk any hapless stranger who might block her path. Knowledge didn't unravel the knotted mess of emotions inside Rachel, feelings that weren't natural at all, and shouldn't be there. Nor did knowledge lessen the betrayal she felt that her own sister would shag the man Rachel had once married.

Rachel bit the inside of her cheek to help check her emotions, and pressed her lips together to keep her chin from quivering. She finished her cosmopolitan and pretended that all was well, that she and Luce had intended to meet for a moment and then go their separate ways. She left fifteen pounds for the waitress, and walked with heavy steps toward Hillers.

Hillers was one of her favorite restaurants.

She'd have preferred walking into a hangman's noose.

Her wristwatch read 8:04 when she stepped back through the restaurant's leaded-glass doors. She ducked into the loo to check her face, re-apply lipstick, dab at the corners of her eyes. Perfect. Beautiful. Aging. Time marched on.

She pushed through the same crowd near the bar, arrived at the same entry to the dining room. She peered in at antique picture frames, modern lighting, and soothing ambience. It stood in stark contrast to the bar at the front of the restaurant, and starker contrast to the storm that raged inside Rachel.

Hector and Hetta—even their names fit together—sat at a table for four, H to Heck's right.

They looked friendly but not intimate.

H looked grown up. She'd been so precocious as a child, so filled with questions that Mother had been driven spare. Those questions had never stopped; they had served her well, in fact. H had matriculated a year ahead of her schoolmates, was just now finishing her degree, and at age twenty had already secured a good job at a prestigious company. H—Hetta—wasn't a child anymore. She was the adult Luce said she was.

But damnit, she was still her younger sister.

Hector looked relaxed, comfortable. He looked happy. In black denim pants and a dark blue suit jacket, neither over nor underdressed, he fit right in with the somewhat upmarket crowd of Hillers. His hair remained shiny-black, without a hint of gray.

He'd been the perfect Prince Charming for her, and he still looked the role today.

Only Hector wasn't Rachel's perfect partner anymore; really, he never been. That was Luce.

Few things filled Rachel with dread: the knowledge that her parents were getting old, and that one or both of them would die in the not-so-distant future; the idea of losing Luce....

To her great surprise, she'd felt dread when the equal marriage bill gained momentum and finally came to a vote in Parliament. Luce had been so excited, and the closer the bill came to Royal decree, the more terrified Rachel had grown. "I cocked it up once, Luce," she'd finally said. "I don't want to risk it, not when we're doing so well without."

Luce had taken it well. They had made love that night, for much of the night; Rachel had called in sick the next morning and Luce had called her mother and begged her to open the flower shop. They'd stayed in bed most of that day.

But Luce still looked wistful whenever she was asked to do the flowers for someone else's wedding.

Steeling herself, Rachel called out to them. "Hector! Hetta!" If she stood here thinking much longer she'd be sobbing in a public restaurant.

H smiled and waved. Heck stood and opened his arms for a hug. Rachel accepted it, and she smelled Hetta's Creed on Heck, on his cheek and on the collar of his jacket. Jealousy, irrational, unwanted, sputtered inside her.

H was looking around the room while Heck held Rachel's chair for her. "Where's Luce?" she asked.

"Couldn't make it," Rachel said. "She sends her love. Catch me up, the pair of you." She looked right at H. "You first."

H was too bright to miss that something was wrong, but she forged ahead, spoke of university on the continent and her fluent Dutch, of the Rijksmuseum and the clouds of winter, and said how much she loved being back in London. Rachel counted back in her mind. Every time H had come home, Hector had been in the city. But H didn't mention Hector in her tales.

“Sounds wonderful, Hetta,” she said. “I envy you.” She turned to Heck before H could ask questions. “Now you. How was Argentina?”

Rachel watched the animated way his face moved as he spoke, the way he smiled, how his hands moved to emphasize his tale—the way his gaze darted to Hetta’s, making sure he kept her entertained. Long ago, Rachel had been the woman whose attention he craved like that.

“And that’s why the moon is made of Stilton, and Mars doesn’t deliver,” Heck said.

Rachel blinked. “It—what?”

Hetta laughed. “Brilliant, Heck. Rachel, you may as well have *been* on Mars. You didn’t hear a word he said, did you?”

She hadn’t. She blinked again, looking between Hector and Hetta. *Hector and Hetta. Rachel and Luce.*

After their divorce, Hector had left the country to put together his life without her, and give Rachel and Luce time to be together for a while. He’d been away for months. Then he’d shown up one evening with a mixed bouquet of yellow roses, white tulips, and lily-of-the-valley to say how much he missed her friendship. Luce had taken the flowers, gone all weepy, and hugged him. She hadn’t told Rachel what they meant; Rachel had been forced to look them up on her own.

Wonderful, dear Heck. He deserved someone to give red roses to.

And Hetta was brilliant, in every sense of the word: vibrant, intelligent, daring life to meet her and determined to take it on her own terms. Hetta and Heck could be perfect together, perfect in a way she and Heck never could have been.

Perfect in the way that she and Luce already were. Let Heck smell of Hetta’s Creed; Luce smelled of all the flowers in nature. Luce smelled like love.

“Rachel.” Hetta’s voice broke through her reverie. H had somehow stood up and walked around the table, while Rachel roiled in her maelstrom, while Rachel’s stormy sea of decades finally calmed, and her imperfect life set itself to rights. “Rachel?” Hetta looked frightened.

“What, Hetta?” she asked.

“You’re crying.”

Rachel felt it then, the heat of tears on her cheeks. She smiled. She didn’t care a damn, not what the restaurant patrons thought, not what Hetta thought, certainly not what Heck thought. She’d cared too much for thought all these years: what

people thought, what the world thought, what she imagined she was supposed to think.

“I need your help. Hetta,” she said, and swiped at her cheeks with her knuckles. “You too, Heck, if you don’t mind too terribly.”

“Anything,” Hetta said.

“Yeah, sure,” Heck said.

“Great. I’m going to propose to Luce.”

Hetta looked giddy.

Heck looked relieved. “It’s about time,” he said. “When?”

“Now. Tonight.”

“What?!” Hetta and Heck both asked, simultaneously. Perhaps they were the answer to each other’s question. She hoped so, now.

“Hetta, Heck, I screwed up. I know I did. Heck, I hurt you all those years ago because I couldn’t tell myself the truth. I didn’t know how.”

“Rachel,” Heck said, shaking his head. Being the perfect man. “That’s ancient history. You can’t change who you love, or who you are.” His eyes darted to H.

Rachel smiled past the ache in her heart. Perhaps Heck just loved Stanton women. “Heck, I love you for knowing that,” she said. “But I didn’t know that. I’m not sure I really knew that until now.” She turned to H. “Hetta. You do what Dad told me to do ten years ago, and you follow your heart, wherever it takes you. No matter what.”

Hetta glanced at Hector, briefly, and smiled. “Yeah. What do you need from us?”

“First off,” Rachel said, “I need a ride home. Luce dumped me in the bar up the street.”

Heck stood up, fishing keys out of his pocket. Hetta pulled her coat off the back of her chair. Rachel’s knights in shining armor... Some part of her had known, when she saw Luce the first time. The best part of her had known that what she and Luce had was *it*, was real. But the old-fashioned, white-caked, heterosexual fairy tale was ingrained in her, in the world.

She hadn’t been able to let go of that, even though she’d been lucky enough to live her fairy tale all this time.

“Do you notice,” Hetta said as they left the restaurant, “that you spend a lot of time with your head in the sand, and a lot of time chasing after what you already have?”

Rachel laughed and dragged her sister into a one-armed hug. Hetta really was the smart one.

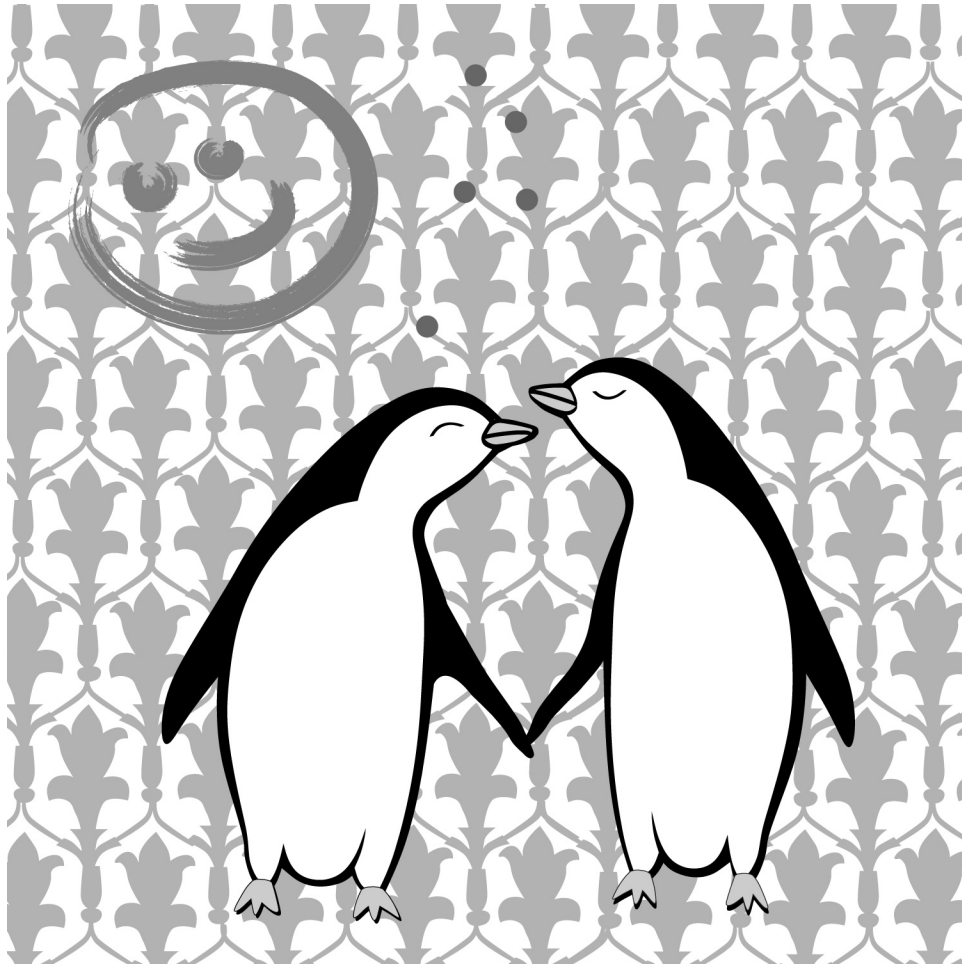
“Yes,” she said. “I might do.”

“Heck’s going to be best man, you know,” Hetta said.

She glanced past Hetta, caught Heck’s eye. He smiled. Love, real love, never turned to hate.

“Yeah,” she said, “he is. Luce will love it.”





Silver

by Jane Mailander

Editor's Notes

I'm not a fan of numerology. In that regard I'm a bit like Sherlock Holmes. You can't touch it, and you can't test it. It is like religion and spirituality and witchcraft and all manner of silly fantasies. It is a figment of the frightened imaginations of grown-up children afraid of the dark.

And yet.

Silver

by Jane Mailander

1.

The subject first enters Sherlock's mind while he stands over the corpse of a man bludgeoned with a frying pan. (The wife is in custody of course, sobbing that she and the mister had had a row but she hadn't done the deed, they'd been coming up on their 25th anniversary and why would she do such a thing?) While John mutters that the scene is a 1960s sitcom come to life and Sherlock testily asks him what the hell the telly has to do with this situation, the consulting part of the firm continues to take in details and comb them into place.

Sherlock directs the police to look more carefully at the height of the blood spray and the partial footprint under the window. The culprit turns out to be the neighbour below, a mousey bloke obsessed with the wife for months and who became enraged when she turned him down – and chose the time after the couple's fight to commit murder and frame the woman who refused him.

"I'd like five minutes with that shit." John looks at the blubbing oaf through the two-way mirror, jaw and fists clenched. "They were almost at their quarter-century anniversary, and he destroyed them."

Sherlock files that away as another thing-John-feels-that-I-don't-understand in the mind palace. "This would have been just as pointless had he done this before their 17th anniversary, or as they left the church after the ceremony."

John exhales hard through his nose and nods. But it's the reason he writes up the case under the blog title "The Missing One-Quarter."

2.

Both men go to Lestrade's do at the station, John grinning and Sherlock bitching as is his wont in a social situation. It's a good party and the atmosphere is lightened greatly by Lestrade finally being cleared by the Commissioner. John's impending nuptials are also celebrated at the station (which touches John greatly), and Sherlock not being dead after all is a nice touch, too.

Naturally Sherlock distinguishes himself upon the occasion. In his speech, he acknowledges that 25 years on the force is generally regarded as an important milestone, even if it's more likely just another tip to pointless numerology. John winces at the silent police and the politely smiling Greg and is very glad Sherlock doesn't have a car, as he'd have incurred his weight in parking and speeding citations for the next two years.

To be fair, Holmes continues on to make a very touching talk about the courage and tenacity to achieve such a length of service in an often-unrewarding job. He unflinchingly discusses the angry young heroin addict Lestrade had believed in and saved more than once, before that addict began to save others. (Most of the Yard don't understand why Greg blushes so furiously when Sherlock mentions that his brother, who was very grateful for that intervention, wished to offer his congratulations to the DI in a more personal venue; Donovan purses her lips to hide the smirk, and John stands at parade rest with his best stone face.)

He all but carries John home and pours him into bed. He still doesn't quite understand it all. It's just a number.

3.

In the 25th year since the millennium began both men agree that the Garrideb case will be their last.

This is the case where Sherlock learns that he does not react well to the sound and sight of John Watson getting shot and bleeding out in a curio shop. Only his friend's angry rebuke keeps Sherlock from tearing the trigger-happy American apart with his bare hands ("Nurse, make yourself goddamn useful and press here! There's been enough blood lost").

John's second bullet wound leaves him with an actual damaged leg, which no amount of running after Sherlock will cure (any and all running, in fact, is put on indefinite hold). Evans is imprisoned pending extradition; Natalie Garrideb, the elderly proprietress with the odd surname who'd seen her promised riches dashed, becomes a bitter, mumbling mess; the doctor once again turns patient; and the consulting detective runs a new evaluation of the pros and cons of his profession: Go mad from inactivity, or go mad with grief?

Enough, both say, Sherlock firmly and John with a lot of swearing (they make this vow during one of John's PT sessions). They will call it quits and find something else to do. Sherlock has never worried overmuch about the financial side of their venture, but John is better at keeping track of that aspect of their work, especially when illustrious or well-heeled clients are involved. They have a decent financial cushion to rest on while they decide what to do next.

And Sherlock chooses his brand of madness. John's instant response lets the other man know that this deduction was spot-on, and that he will not be alone in this asylum: "About time you saw what was in front of you, you twat. I didn't want to wait for the other $\frac{3}{4}$ of the damn century to pass."

And Sherlock finally begins to understand what this numerology means.

4.

221 Baker Street hums with bees. They are a jumble of species, most of them eusocial and none of them produce honey, but the rooftop garden is a riot of well-pollinated vegetables and flowers, bordered by the roses Mrs. Hudson bequeathed both of them. Sherlock is enthralled with the little insects, and has been ever since their retirement – with the extra *frisson* of urgency about reversing hive colony collapse that feels very like trying to stop an immense crime in progress. His findings have gained him a new generation of fans in the apiculture community. He turns down requests for his aid in criminal matters (except for the very, very rare one that presents itself as a puzzle, perhaps 2-3 times a decade) and has been known to spend three days in a row without descending into the building. (Best of all, his foul-smelling laboratory has moved permanently into a rooftop shed.)

Semi-retired as he is, Sherlock still pays the bills with his deductive abilities – second-hand, through John's books based on his original blog entries, expanded and revised. Six short-story collections and novel-length treatments of four cases have made John Holmes-Watson a minor celebrity on the crime-writer circuit (easy to pick him out in a crowded conference room, a small white-haired plainly-dressed man with a hobbling gait gripping the gold lion head atop a mahogany cane). At such gatherings attendees and fellow speakers invariably ask why John's famous husband never accompanies him; "He doesn't like to leave the bees alone, he's deathly afraid he'll miss something," John says, and it's mostly true.

This week John is not at a conference, and Sherlock actually leaves his hives to the care of one of his beekeeper associates. Both are in Paris, dancing in a room full of like-minded couples. They are in no danger of recognition, these two old geezers shuffling around a small patch of floor; Sherlock Watson-Holmes has grown a paunch and age has settled into his bones and joints, even without the benefit of two bullet wounds that make his spouse slower and stumble-footed.

A small grunt of pain from John and Sherlock knows the dance is over. Back to their hotel room, then; a hot bath for two, the rest of the champagne, and the bed in which they will sleep together as they have for the last quarter century.

Twenty-five years, it has been – twenty-five years to the day they agreed on this new definition of their relationship. They’ve aged, lost dear friends, gained new ones, watched each other grow old, fought, apologized, left behind youth and mid-life, settled into each other’s crevices like two saplings that grow into one conjoined tree.

Twenty-five years. Three weeks longer than that poor dead man and heartbroken woman had had together. Now he understood.

“I should have let you thrash that bastard,” he murmurs.





About the Contributors

Ashlyn

Ashlyn's first fannish lust was Flint McCullough from *Wagon Train*. His "beefcake bondage" scenes were most likely the beginning of her interest in hurt/comfort. Her stories can be found here: <http://www.seacouver.com/>

She discovered Escapade at the same time as online fandoms, and attended her first Escapade in 1997, only missing one year since then. Ashlyn plays a small part in helping to organize the con, is the current keeper of the Escapade Zine Library, and carries on the regular work of responding to attendee inquiries and emails, answering new people's questions and pointing long-time attendees in the right direction. This year, she also helped organize the fanzine.

Astolat

I'd been writing fanfic since 1994, but when I attended Escapade for the first time, back in the glory days of *Sentinel* and *Highlander*, that marked the point at which I finally tipped over from FIJAGH to FIAWOL (and have never looked back since). I think that was also the year when Killa's amazing vid, *Dante's Prayer*, premiered in the vidshow and with one blow turned me into a vidder (and ultimately led to starting Vividcon!).

I haven't been able to attend as often in recent years, but Escapade will always be one of my spiritual homes in fandom whether I manage to get there in body or not. The roots of the OTW and AO3 are there, in the community that wide-open welcomed any fan to propose a panel, to make a vid, to get her hands into running the vidshow, that made it seem not only doable but sensible to just dive in and make the kind of spaces that we wanted in the world.

I'm so glad to be part of this zine and this con, twenty years and forty fandoms on. <3

Charlotte C. Hill

I started writing narrative fiction when I was nine years old, and my mother still has the WiP to prove it. My first zine fic was published by Mkashef Enterprises, so long ago that I can't cite the year. Or the pseud. I'm *pretty* sure about the pairing. I wrote my first pro fic with Tedy Ward, and I recently decided to publish all of my sexy titles, fan or pro, as Charlotte Christine Hill. I'm kind of excited about it.

As the co-chair of Escapade, I have been around the con since, well, the con has been around, blowing wind into its sails when doldrums hit, striking sparks when the wood was wet, negotiating contracts, organizing, and loaning the convention my credit card. I just finished an *Almost Human* story (that really, *really* wanted to be a novel) for the Escapade nostalgia zine. And I had the great pleasure of working with the Escapade zine authors. Each and every contributor was humbling in her generosity, cooperation, ease of editing, and/or talent. Wow. Just—wow.

Devo

My first fannish crush was Dr. Kildare, followed in short order by Illya Kuryakin and Spock. Not knowing of the existence of fanfic, I invented it myself out of necessity when the final episode of *Forever Knight* demanded an internally consistent rewrite. I and a fellow *Highlander* fan traveled to a con in Baltimore, and discovered online fandom when people asked, "what are your online names" and we realized we didn't have any. This soon led to an immersion in online lists, the discovery of slash, and the first dabbling in writing fics, primarily Duncan/Methos. I really found my stride, though, in writing Duncan/Methos poems, highlighting an aspect of their (eternal) relationship. My work appeared in several zines, including *Futures Without End* and *Wounded Heroes*, which I co-edited with rac.

I have attended Escapade numerous times and count people I met there among my closest friends. I am delighted to be part of this

special anniversary zine. I currently live in Albuquerque and welcome contact by fannish folk. Email: devohoneybee@yahoo.com or through Dreamwidth, blog name devohoneybee.

Dovya Blacque

I fell into writing K/S before I'd ever heard of fandom, fan fiction or, certainly "K/S". Not long after that I went to the Ultimate Fantasy convention in Houston where I met my first K/S fans and was introduced to the *Out of Bounds* zines. As a lot of K/S fiction at the time was death fic (centered around Spock's death in ST II), and I really disliked death fic, my friend Tere Ann Roderick suggested I start my own fanzine and so *As I Do Thee* and Mkashef Enterprises (Hi, Charlotte!) were born. I've branched out into writing and publishing many other fandoms now (*Miami Vice*, *Beauty & The Beast*, *The Sentinel*, *Wiseguy*, etc.), these long 35 years since. I, along with Alexis Fegan Black and Natasha Solten, organized Koon-ut-Cali-Con for two years (1989/1990) in San Diego, sort of the precursor con to Escapade. I still write fan fiction, though now I also write original fiction. My other passion in life is painting. My art can be seen at <https://www.artfinder.com/alayne-gelfand> and my fanzines can be found at www.asidozines.com. And, if that doesn't "out" my real name to fandom, nothing will.

Franzeska

Franzeska has been rattling around fandom since 1994 on alt.tv.x-files, always under her highly distinctive real name. (Hi, Mom.) She vids so much she's just moved to LA to pursue a career in video editing. (Want a business card?) Her fic output has mostly been for Yuletide and other exchanges. She's an inveterate small fandoms person. It's only in recent years that she's gotten into cons and zines, but now she's helping out with Escapade's dance party and doing a fandom oral history project.

Glacis

Glacis has been writing fan fiction since 1991, when she needed a way to keep her brain from melting in grad school. She first attended Escapade in 1996 and was incredibly excited to find out that others were as perverse as she, and that there were such things as "zines" – she'd

thought for too long she was alone in the world, as this was before slash came out of the closet on the net. She has returned every year she was able, and thoroughly enjoyed each con.

Glacis is one pseudonym she uses, along with Seeker and Sue Castle. She has written over 300 stories in about 70 fandoms. Her work has been translated into a dozen languages, been published in zines spanning 25 years on four continents, has won fan awards in *X-Files* and *Stargate*, and has twice had her translated and illustrated stories featured as manga at Comiket (the world's largest dojinshi fair, in Tokyo). She's currently in love with *Grimm* and *Bleach*, and likes to play with the supernatural. Her fan bio is at <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Glacis>. She's had her own archive since 1995 at <http://castleskeep.net/> and is found at AO3 at <http://archiveofourown.org/users/glacis/pseuds/glacis>.

Jane Mailander

Jane Mailander was 14 in 1977 when she discovered *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, written science fiction, and puberty all within 2 months, and she has never recovered. Even before she understood the mechanics of gay sex she pictured Kirk and Spock in bed with each other; however at age 7 she was firmly convinced that Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Greenjeans were married to each other.

From reading Trek fanfic she started writing it at 17. Although she has sold a few short stories here and there, her love is for fanfic and poetry (and the occasional cartoon). She is currently firmly ensconced at 221b Baker Street in every incarnation from ACD Canon to *Elementary* (including the damn mice).

In the history of Escapade, she has missed attending only once. She still remembers (hiding in the video room from) the male strippers in the con's first two years, as well as the "throw Shoshanna in the pool" incident at the art auction that one year. And the adorable plush teddy bear she bought at the hotel gift shop that first Escapade still sleeps with her – raggedy and worn now. (Was also happy to introduce a Scottish *Supernatural* fan to root beer.)

She still writes under the pseudonym "gardnerhill" at AO3 and Livejournal.

KatBear

The first con I ever attended was Shore Leave a long time ago, but I've been a regular at Escapade for many years. It's a great place to meet folks and talk about things in person, and I particularly enjoy it when we get *Star Wars* panels on the schedule.

Which came first – the writer or the fan? The fan. I was quite a latecomer to writing. In the late 90s I got back into *Star Trek* and found slash – my first fannish stories were a couple of short K/S PWP's in 1999-2000, but since ST:TPM came out in 2000 I have written primarily in that universe. Q/O is my OTP. I've had stories posted in several zines, mostly *Constricted by Plot* (ten of those), but also *Moonbeam 7* and *8* as well as *Songs of Innocence*, *Songs of Experience*. All of the stories I have posted to date are located on Archive of Our Own (AO3) <http://archiveofourown.org/users/katbear/works>

If people could read only one piece by you, what would you recommend? *Master's Voice*. For those who don't like slash - *Shooting Star*. If you like it dark and non-con, then *Jailbait*.

Mead

ML Mead finally made contact with fandom thanks to the internet, and loves the internet for that, but it was only a matter of months before she was arranging to meet other fans offline as well as online. From small get-togethers to small cons to slightly larger cons, Escapade was an inevitable destination, and her once-in-a-lifetime-trip turned into a must-repeat-as-often-as-possible ambition. She reads and natters about a variety of fandoms (largely on LJ: <http://moonlightmead.livejournal.com/>), but writes mostly *The Professionals*. Denizens of online fandom keep telling her that she arrived too late for zines, whether buying them or writing for them; she is delighted to discover that this is not the case.

Megan Kent

Megan's fannish history includes intermittent fic writing, vidding, fanzine editing/ publishing, and convention organization. She founded Escapade with Charlotte in 1990, on the way home from a planning meeting for another con with the insistence: it doesn't have to be this hard! She can't quite believe they've been producing Escapade half her life.

After being without an active fandom for years, Megan fell head over heels for Hawkeye and Agent Coulson a couple of years ago. This is her first completed story in the MCU.

Naked Bee

Naked Bee has been having a great time recently drawing a lot of penguins. Any formatting errors that have found their way into this zine are entirely her fault (she was probably thinking about penguins when she should have been paying attention to em versus en dashes). You can find her other fanart projects at <http://nakedbee.dreamwidth.org/> and <http://www.rawbanana.org/>.

Natasha Solten

Natasha Solten has edited and written for dozens of fanzines, mostly notably in *Star Trek* and *Blake's 7* fandoms. Seasoned readers may recall the slash titles she published: *Daring Attempt 1-9*, *Charisma 1-19*, *Resistance 1-8*, as well as novels. Her stand-alone K/S novel, *The Prince*, is still a favorite.

She started attending Escapade when the convention was first birthed, but left fandom for awhile in 2000 to pursue other things. In 2013 and 2014 she came back to Escapade and had a blast. In 2009 she started writing slash fanfic again, most heavily in the now mostly defunct (much to her chagrin) *Wiseguy* fandom (50+ stories). She has also recently written four stories in *Hawaii Five-0* fandom, as well as one pre-slashy *Supernatural* story. All her recent fanfic (since 2009) is on AO3 under the handle: natashasolten.

Writing under her real name, Wendy Rathbone, in January 2015 she completed "The Foundling" trilogy, an original male/male romance series which consists of the novels: *The Foundling*, *None Can Hold the Dark*, and *The Lostling: Alec's Story*. Her science fiction novel, *Letters to an Android*, which also has male/male relationships,

came out in 2014. She also wrote two licensed *Vampire Diaries* novellas for Kindle Worlds. She is currently writing an original vampire-fairy m/m romance novel which may turn into a series. All her books, including three short story collections, are available on Amazon.com.

Wendy is also a prolific poet, having sold her work since the '80s to dozens of literary and genre magazines, and more recently to: *Asimov's SF*, *Apex*, and more. Her latest poetry collection, *Turn Left at November*, is just out from Eldritch Press.

Natasha Solten blogs at: <http://natashasolten.livejournal.com/>

Wendy Rathbone blogs at: <http://wendyrathbone.blogspot.com/>

PFL

PFL has been writing fan fiction all her life, but only discovered fandom when the internet made connection easier. Her first story was a *Quantum Leap/Starsky & Hutch* crossover posted on a usenet newsgroup. Through that story she developed friendships which led to the discovery of zines and cons and the show that became her heart-fandom: *The Professionals*. She has written and published stories in several fandoms and a range of zines, but she remains most prolific in Pros. You may find her stories on AO3: <http://archiveofourown.org/users/msmoat>; or connect with her on DW or LJ under the username msmoat.

She attended a couple of Escapades back in the nineties, but this year marks her return to the con and the (exotic-to-her) location of LA.

Raine Wynd

Encouraged by her mother, Raine Wynd started writing when she was six years old and living in the Philippines. Telling stories about life overseas to her American relatives turned into a lifelong passion for writing, language, and the dynamics of people in ordinary and unusual situations. She has been writing fanfic since 1998 and has published in several zines in multiple fandoms. Professionally, she has edited correspondence and technical documentation for a variety of industries, which has led to a lot of personal knowledge upon which to draw for various stories. A frequent attendee, panel moderator, and volunteer at Escapade since 2002, she's now juggling writing *Pacific Rim*

fanfic while still promoting the *Pacific Rim* con, Shatterdome Seattle, as its social media coordinator. Raine can be found at: rainewynd.com, on Dreamwidth as raine, on AO3 as Raine_Wynd, Twitter as Raine_Wynd, and Tumblr as rainewynd.

Rachael Sabotini

Rachael Sabotini started writing fan fic in the late 1980s, after word processing software became commonplace on computers. She swears she never would have finished a thing if it had to be handwritten or typed. Her first story was in a TNG compilation, under a completely different pseudonym and on software so old, it's (thankfully) impossible to decode today. She was drinking with the crowd when the idea for Escapade popped up, but she didn't attend until Escapade #2, which makes her a long term resident of the asylum.

Rhi

Rhi (aka Gryphonrhi and Rhi Shaw) scribbled down her first stories at eleven, both fanfic and original fic. She started up again at twenty-six or so and has been writing *Highlander* and other fandoms ever since. She's shown up in zines from *Futures Without End* to *Wounded Heroes*, written every length from drabble to novels, and tried her hand at fairy tales and mysteries, horror and comedy. Her stories can all be found, sooner or later, at AO3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/users/Gryphonrhi>) and are usually mentioned at her Dreamwidth account (<http://rhi.dreamwidth.org/>).

Rhi shares a house with her husband, a lot of books, and possibly even more plot bunnies. She lives on an island off the coast of Antarctica which requires sending manuscripts in via messenger penguins. Sometimes the penguins run late hunting for food, but it's not like owls want to swim the Atlantic to deliver mail, so what can you do? Occasionally this results in submissions smelling a bit fishy, like this bio.

Sandy Herrold

Sandy Herrold always loved to read and constantly made up stories to keep herself entertained. She found *Star Trek* fandom in the 1980s as an offshoot in her interest in Sci Fi and Medieval History, and zines—many zines, many photocopies of zines, and many interesting stories about the sharing of zines—became a big part of her life. While she started with *Trek*, she quickly fell into *Starsky & Hutch* and *Miami Vice* fandom, writing an epic crossover of the two universes, and ended up attending the S&H 15th Anniversary convention with Rachael Sabotini. While there, the two of them ran into Charlotte and Megan, who had looked around the place and asked themselves, “Hey, shouldn’t we put on our own con?”

They were so fast at organization that a mere four months later, the first Escapade was born. While Sandy couldn’t attend con #1, she and rache both showed for con #2, and consistently attended thereafter. You can hear her voice on many of the videotapes of those early conventions, usually followed by gales of laughter. She passed away in 2011.

